“This Ain’t the Nineties”:

Chicago’s Black Street Gangs in the Twenty-First Century

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016

Chicago, Illinois

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This work is dedicated to the loving memory of Thomas F. Olson, a true friend.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation was only possible with the love and support I received from the many teachers, mentors, family members, and friends who have helped me throughout this process and my life’s journey more generally. First, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for their mentorship and guidance during the course of shaping, conducting, and writing this dissertation. To my chair and advisor, Mark Mattaini, thank you for encouraging me to be myself and to retain my grounding in the face of ivory tower conditioning. This study would have been considerably more difficult and perhaps impossible without the support of a champion like you. Jim Gleeson, working with you over the past few years on this and other projects has been a blessing that has kept me going in more ways than one. Your compassion for the marginalized, thoughtfulness, and eye for detail have helped shape the writing of this dissertation. Joseph Strickland, thank you for mentoring me in my community work, putting me in with good folks in the ’hood, and inspiring my eventual return to school. If not for you, I probably would have never decided to pursue my Ph.D. John Hagedorn, your work showed me the utility of strong, critical research rooted in the realities of the streets. This study would not exist without your inspiring work and critical feedback. Thank you! Robert Lombardo, thanks for first sparking my interest in the world of research all the way back in my undergraduate days at Loyola University Chicago. Your perspective based on your experiences as a police officer on Chicago’s streets, moreover, has often provided me with a challenging and useful counterpoint to my own viewpoint. Thanks also to J Breezer Rickey for being a great teacher and mentor and for providing key assistance on this research project at the drop of a dime!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (continued)

I would also like to thank the people I have had the pleasure of working with during my years on the South Side of Chicago. To the Grand Boulevard/Washington Park crew, especially Ken Davis, Cornelius Ellen, and Andrea Lee, thanks for helping me get my footing on the South Side and for continuing to provide me with mentoring and friendship. To my Woodlawn people, especially Renita Austin, Warren Beard, Mattie Butler, Bryan Echols, Alex Gardner, Chuck Hayes, Erick Puckett, and Otelua Thomas, thanks for the support and education during my many trials by fire in “Hoodlawn.” To Shannon Bennett and Jitu Brown from North Kenwood/Oakland, Juan Cruz from Albany Park, and Josina Morita from everywhere (ha!), thanks for the comradeship in our battles to improve the lives of young people in our city. To the folks from 95th Street, especially LeVon Stone, Sr., Angie Cummings, John Hardy, Lonnie Black, and Tamikia DeBerry, thank you all for embracing me and bringing me into the family. To Michael Wilson, Mariam Omari, Dale McCauley, and the folks at Y.O.U., thanks for helping me get my start in working with young people. Flory Sommers, thanks for the inspiration!

Thanks to my family and friends who have supported me during this process and shaped me into the man I am today. To my wife, Piere Washington, thank you for holding me down in every way possible, for always believing in me, and for helping me process my thoughts about my research findings over the last three years. I love you! To my daughter, Paris, you have made this process much more challenging—which, of course, is part of your job—but life much more joyful. Thank you! To my mother and father, Beth Rademacher and Tony Aspholm, thank you for giving me my sense of compassion and social justice and my work ethic. To my brother, Jim(bo), thanks for teaching me to take it easy once in a while and to have fun. To my sister, Rose, thanks for teaching me not to compromise on the values that I hold most dear. To my
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (continued)

brother, Martin, thank you for showing me how to be a good big brother—a very useful skill for working with young people! To my brothers Kawaskii Bacon and Abdul Omari, thank you for always supporting me and for inspiring me by making positive moves when so many of our friends have gone in other directions. To the rest of my guys from Minneapolis that I don’t speak with as much anymore, I still love you! To Marcus Davis, Julio Puma, Ben Thullen, and my people from Chicago, thank you for your friendship over the last dozen (!) years and for helping me like the city enough to stay that long. Special thanks also go out to the Olson, Bobo, and Puma families for serving as an extended family. To all of the young people I have worked with throughout the years—who are far too many to name—please know that I love you all and am still here for you anytime you need me!

Most importantly, I would like to thank the young men who shared their lives with me by participating in this study. I can’t mention your names in these acknowledgements for obvious reasons, but please know that I love and appreciate you all from the bottom of my heart. I have tried my best to do your stories justice in the pages of this dissertation, and I hope I have succeeded to the greatest extent possible! Special thanks go out to Sheldon Smith and Kenny Rainey, who provided me with tremendous assistance throughout the research process and without whom this study would have been impossible. More than that, you two have been like brothers to me for nearly a decade now. Thanks for everything, fellas! Finally, rest in peace to Thomas Olson, Daniel Gomez, Keonte Blair, Harold Bobbitt, Marcus London, Corey Harris, Micah Williams, Damian Turner, Bearling Robinson, and to all those who have lost their lives to the violence of the streets.

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SUMMARY

The salience of street gangs and gang violence as serious social issues is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in Chicago, a city with an estimated 150,000 gang members and nearly twice as many gunshot victims as New York and Los Angeles combined (Chicago Crime Commission, 2012; Sweeney & Gorner, 2016). Yet, despite the city’s deeply entrenched gang problem and persistently high levels of violence, little empirical research has been conducted exploring the current dynamics within Chicago’s street gangs and the nature of the violence in which gang members are involved, and effective strategies for addressing these issues have remained elusive. The current study addresses these gaps in the literature using an inductive, grounded theory methodology and in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews to explore the experiences and perspectives of 20 active, African American gang members ages 16–31 from a number of high-violence communities on the South Side of Chicago.

The study findings indicate that the nature of the African American street gangs on Chicago’s South Side has undergone a radical transformation since the dawn of the century. The convergence of a number of major sociohistorical developments over the last two decades, including the waning demand for crack cocaine, the demolition of the city’s public housing projects, and the incarceration of gang leaders in federal prisons, served to drastically weaken the city’s hierarchical, cross-neighborhood, drug-selling street organizations. Within this context, many of the study participants and other rank-and-file gang members came to recognize their gangs’ organizational arrangements and practices as inherently coercive and exploitive and their marginal positions within these organizations as increasingly permanent. Young people who had joined gangs as a way of resisting their experiences of marginalization, insecurity, and domination, in other words, came to find their experiences within these gangs as similarly
SUMMARY (continued)

oppressive. Once-powerful gang leaders, in turn, lost their legitimacy in the eyes of their youthful underlings, who waged internal rebellions that effectively shattered these gangs.

In the wake of these rebellions, young gang members reconstructed their gangs in entirely new ways, rejecting traditional gang ideologies in favor of personal relationships and embracing principles of egalitarianism and autonomy. Thus, today’s gangs operate independently at the neighborhood level, are intentionally democratic, and are increasingly comprised of members with different and often conflicting traditional gang identities. These remarkable shifts in gang organization and culture, in turn, have fundamentally transformed the nature of gang violence across much of the city’s South Side, as the cross-neighborhood drug wars of the 1990s have been replaced with hyperlocal, vendetta-style conflicts typically rooted in interpersonal animosities and driven by principles of group solidarity and collective liability. In contrast to the top-down nature of the gang wars of previous periods, moreover, individual gang members today wield definitive autonomy with respect to their participation in gang violence, often making this violence much more volatile than in the past.

These study findings reveal the historically contingent nature of street gangs and gang violence and have important implications for addressing these issues as they exist in Chicago today. The efficacy of popular violence reduction approaches that rely on coercion, social control, detecting and interrupting violent events, and/or the authority or legitimacy of former gang leaders is likely to be, and has been, limited. An alternative approach that focuses on building personal relationships with gang members and helping them to reimagine and refashion their resistance identities in the pursuit of social and community transformation is discussed as a promising alternative.
I. INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In its 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment, the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) authoritatively concluded that: “Gangs are expanding, evolving and posing an increasing threat to US communities nationwide…. becoming more violent…. adaptable, organized, sophisticated, and opportunistic” (p. 9). The report, based on data collected from thousands of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, went on to claim that there are 30,000 street gangs operating in the United States with a combined estimated membership of over 1 million. A similar report from the National Gang Center (2013) asserted that street gangs, once a phenomenon largely confined to major cities, are currently present in not only 85% of large cities, but also 50% of suburban counties, 30% of smaller cities, and 14% of rural areas throughout the country. These statistics underscore the contention that gangs are responsible for an average of 48%, and as much as 90%, of all violent crime in jurisdictions nationwide (NGIC, 2011). Furthermore, law enforcement claims that, in addition to their continued engagement in internecine violence and drug distribution, many gangs are now transnational in scope and are increasingly involved in a broad range of sophisticated criminal endeavors, such as wide-scale drug and human trafficking and various forms of white collar crime (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2007; NGIC, 2011).

While the accuracy of such depictions of street gangs will be debated below, it is certainly true that gang violence has severe and far-reaching effects, particularly in distressed urban communities in which levels of such violence tend to be highest. For example, witnessing acts of violence, living in a high-violence community, or even simply hearing about neighborhood violence can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, internalizing disorders,
posttraumatic stress, and separation anxiety, among other detrimental effects (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsh, 2001; DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Freeman & Mokros, 1994; Scarpa, Hurley, Shumate, & Haden, 2006). High levels of gang violence, moreover, compromise the sense of public safety within a neighborhood and corrode community cohesion and collective efficacy, as residents minimize their public activity in an attempt to avoid victimization (Howard, Kaljee, & Jackson, 2002; Maschi, Pérez, & Tyson, 2010; Plutenney, 1997; Venkatesh, 2006). In addition, neighborhood violence has been shown to reduce property values and decrease local business activity (Greenbaum & Tita, 2004; Lynch & Rasmussen, 2001). The effects of gang violence, however, fall most heavily on gang members themselves, who are the victims of homicide at a rate of nearly 900 per 100,000. To place this figure into perspective, gang members are murdered at a rate approximately 100 times greater than the average homicide rate for the 100 largest cities in the United States (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010; see also Maxson, Curry, & Howell, 2002; Papachristos, Wilderman, & Roberto, 2014).

Yet, the very real effects of gang violence notwithstanding, a number of prominent gang scholars have called into question what they argue are sensationalistic and exaggerated portrayals of street gangs and gang members advanced by law enforcement and elected officials and propagated through mass media (Brotherton, 2015; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Conquergood, 1996; Durán, 2013; Hagedorn, 1990, 1998; Levenson, 2013; McCorkle & Miethe, 2002; J. Moore, 1991; Zatz, 1987). Hagedorn and Chesney-Lind (2014), for example, have astutely called attention to the paradox seemingly inherent in law enforcement’s portrayal of gangs as proliferating and becoming more dangerous over the last two decades and the remarkable nationwide declines in crime and violence during this same period. Similarly, Katz and Jackson-
Jacobs (2004) noted that, “Many social areas lacking gangs somehow produce crime rates from their youth population equivalent to those in ‘gang-infested’ areas, indicating that the relationship of gangs and violence, where it exists, is spurious” (p. 99). Even an overview of youth gangs published by the U.S. Department of Justice concluded that, “Violence is a rare occurrence in proportion to all gang activities…. For the most part, gang members ‘hang out’ and are involved in other normal adolescent social activities” (Howell, 1998, p. 8).

Perhaps part of the ambiguity surrounding the scope of the gang issue can be attributed to the complete lack of consensus related to defining street gangs and gang-related crimes. Indeed, the federal government, Washington, DC, and 42 U.S. states each has a unique definition for gangs and various derivations of the term (National Gang Center, 2012), and debates surrounding definitional issues and their attendant implications are among the most commonly discussed topics in the gang literature (Ball & Curry, 1995; Barros & Huff, 2009; Brotherton, 2015; Bursik & Grasmick, 2006; Hagedorn, 2008; Klein, 1995; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Papachristos, 2005; Short, 1998, 2009; Spergel, 1995). Yet, the construction, codification, and modification of definitions of street gangs and gang crime as undertaken by representatives of the state—that is, legislators and law enforcement officials—are inherently political acts. Moreover, as the primary function of such legal definitions is to provide a basis and justification for identifying, surveilling, suppressing, and enhancing the prison sentences of those deemed to be “gang members,” these definitional processes have tremendous implications for the lives of those defined as such as well as for the communities within which they are embedded (Brotherton, 2015; Zatz, 1987). This is particularly true of marginalized urban communities of color whose youth are the overwhelming and often erroneous recipients of the gang member label (Durán, 2013; Phillips, 2012; Rios, 2011). The routine propagation of such politically
charged representations of street gangs and gang members through the media, then, often works to further defame and demonize impoverished young men of color, who constitute an easy target as an often-maligned and politically expendable population. For example, Conquergood (1996) contended that:

The gang member is our urban savage, an all-purpose devil figure onto which we project our deepest fears about social disorder and demographic change. The stereotypical gang member is a young minority male from the impoverished inner city…. [and] there is terrible slippage between the terms “gang members,” “minority youth,” and “black and Latino teenagers.” Labeling someone a gang member licenses the most rabid racism and class bias, and underwrites a formidable legal-juridical apparatus of surveillance and incarceration. (para. 3; see also Brotherton, 2015)

The politics of gang representation, moreover, are especially salient given that most people have little or no actual contact with gang members and, thus, derive most of their information on this population—and, perhaps, young people of color more generally—through these problematic images and narratives (Hagedorn & Chesney-Lind, 2014).

Given their central role in defining the parameters of the “gang problem,” it is perhaps unsurprising that law enforcement and criminal justice agencies have become the major funders of gang research (see Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2015). Yet, although sound gang research relevant to developing more effective policing strategies and criminal justice policies is necessary, the tremendous role played by these agencies in shaping the parameters of gang research is also problematic on a number of levels. On one hand, gangs and their members are deemed worthy of study solely based on their ostensible criminality, which is assumed. A more holistic and humanizing picture of these groups and their members, including the ways in which they are embedded in and shaped by various sociohistorical contexts and the meanings that they ascribe to their experiences, is viewed as unnecessary. Such a narrow approach to understanding street gangs, then, contributes to the type of one-dimensional, stereotypical, and demonizing
depictions of gangs described above. Gang research driven by law enforcement interests also tends to presuppose that the best—or only—way to address gangs is through suppression and incarceration, which already constitute the overwhelming responses to these groups.

Accordingly, the role of the police and the criminal justice system as positive forces of social control is assumed, and official corruption and the role it might play in perpetuating or exacerbating street gangs and gang violence is left uninvestigated (see Hagedorn, 2015).

Conversely, my approach to gang research largely reflects the more critical and humanistic aims described by Hagedorn (2006b), who made the following case for the study of these groups:

Why study gangs? The short answer is that gangs are a significant worldwide phenomenon with millions of members and a voice of those marginalized by processes of globalization. Understanding these social actors is crucial to fashioning public policies and building social movements that can both reduce violence and erode the deep-seated inequalities that all too often are reinforced by present economic, social, and military policies. (p. 181)

Certainly, my personal and professional experiences with gang members and gang violence inform my approach to this research. I describe this positionality below.

**Statement of Positionality**

I was born in 1985 to American parents on the outskirts of a *favela* in São Paulo, Brazil. My birth came in the middle of my parents’ three-year stay in Brazil, where they worked as Catholic missionaries within the tradition of liberation theology. More specifically, they provided support and helped to organize local poor and working-class people in their struggles for human rights under what was, at that time, a brutal military dictatorship. I attended my first public demonstrations at two weeks of age; in the most literal sense, I was born into the fight for social justice. During my parents’ time in Brazil, a number of their Brazilian friends were kidnapped, tortured, and killed by government forces. Yet, the efforts of the people, including student and workers’ groups, religious figures and laypeople, and radical political groups across
the country ultimately brought about the dissolution of the military government and a gradual return to democratic elections in the mid- and late-1980s.

When my parents returned to the United States in 1987, they settled in a working-class, racially-mixed neighborhood in Minneapolis, where I grew up. Most of my childhood friends were African American and came from either working-class families, like myself, or from low-income families. As we entered adolescence, many of my friends joined gangs and became involved in selling drugs. On the other hand, I was fortunate enough—and white enough—to land a job as a cashier at a nearby grocery store when I was only 14 years old, which both helped keep me occupied and put some money in my pocket. Yet, I was not able to avoid trouble completely, and hanging out with my friends often landed me in problematic and violent situations. In particular, attending house parties and similar youth social gatherings on a regular basis put me in the middle of a number of confrontations, fights, brawls, and shootings. When I was a junior in high school, a gang brawl at a house party ended with my closest childhood friend, who had no involvement in the streets whatsoever, being shot in the head and killed. I was sitting next to him in the passenger seat of his car when he was shot.

His death marked a turning point in my life. Although I still hung out with my childhood friends, I stopped going to house parties entirely and soon stopped going to clubs with them, as well, as I constantly seemed to find myself in the midst of a confrontation or violent situation. When I left Minneapolis to come to Chicago for college at Loyola University, I knew that I wanted to be a social worker and work with young people like so many of my friends who felt alienated and often lacked the resources and opportunities that would have helped them travel a different path. At this point, a number of my childhood friends and acquaintances were involved in serious violence and other criminal activities; some of them were going to prison. What’s
more, I believed that if the young men who had killed my friend had had different resources and opportunities in their lives that my friend would still be alive. I was almost killed in that car, as well, and I promised myself and my friend to use my second chance in life to make an impact on the lives of young people and to fight injustice. In a sense, my life was already coming full circle.

During my time in college, I studied social work and worked with young people in a variety of settings and capacities. As part of the program requirements for my master’s degree, which I was studying for at the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Jane Addams College of Social Work, I completed a year-long internship with a community-based organization in an impoverished black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Upon graduating, I took a position with an organization in Woodlawn, a nearby South Side community and the birthplace of the Black P. Stones and a historic stronghold of the Gangster Disciples, two of the country’s oldest and most infamous street gangs. There, I coordinated a number of youth employment, afterschool, and summer programs and helped organize young people around issues related to youth employment, sexual health, and gang violence. During my time working on the South Side, moreover, I observed and helped administer a number of programs designed by “experts” to reduce gang violence. Based on my experiences working with young people involved in gangs and violence, however, many of these programs seemed ill-suited to address this issue; indeed, in at least one case, a program ostensibly designed to reduce violence had inadvertently promoted it!

I decided to return to school to pursue my Ph.D. in order to study what research was being conducted on street gangs and violence in Chicago (and beyond) that might provide some insights into what could be done to address these issues. As it turned out, there was a
tremendous amount of research that had been published on these topics; however, nearly all of
this research had been conducted during the 1990s or earlier. The literature’s depictions of gangs
and violence in Chicago seemed to have little in common with what I had witnessed on the
streets in my work with young gang members. Thus, I decided to conduct a research study that
would give voice to the perspectives and experiences of young gang members about what was
happening on the streets of Chicago today, as opposed to 20 years ago, and to solicit their
opinions on what might be done to address contemporary gang violence. Yet, it seemed
impossible that all of the existing literature, much of which was conducted by renowned
scholars, was so erroneous in its assessment of gangs and violence in Chicago. Indeed, this was
most certainly not the case. I found that understanding this apparent disconnect simply required
me to adopt a more complex interpretive framework.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework employed in this study is a view of street gangs and the
violence in which they are involved as dynamic, historical phenomena shaped by a wide variety
of contextual factors and prone to considerable variations across space and, more importantly
with respect to the current research, time (see, for example, Brotherton & Barrios, 2004;
the conceptual framing of this study is Hagedorn’s (2006a) “Race Not Space: A Revisionist
History of Gangs in Chicago,” which traces the evolution of street gangs in Chicago during the
twentieth century. The author separated Chicago’s gang history into five distinct periods and
delineated the various transformations in the city’s gang landscape over the course of these
historical periods, highlighting, in particular, the ways in which racism shaped the contrasting
trajectories of Chicago’s European ethnic and African American gangs. The final chapter in this
history as documented by Hagedorn involved the transformation of the city’s black street gangs into corporate-style, drug-selling organizations in the wake of deindustrialization and mass incarceration during the post-Civil Rights era (see also Hagedorn, 2008, 2015; Padilla, 1992; Popkin, Gwiasda, Olson, Rosenbaum, & Buron, 2000; Venkatesh, 1997, 2000, 2006; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000).

**Study Rationale and Significance**

The salience of street gangs and gang violence as serious social issues is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in Chicago. The city is reportedly home to as many as 100 street gangs with a combined estimated membership of 150,000, and Illinois is said to have the highest per-capita rate of gang membership of any state in the nation, estimated at between 8 and 11 per 1,000 people (Chicago Crime Commission; NGIC, 2009). To be certain, Chicago is the birthplace of many of the country’s oldest and most notorious street gangs, including the Black Disciples, Black P. Stones, Four Corner Hustlers, Gangster Disciples, Latin Kings, Maniac Latin Disciples, Mickey Cobras, Spanish Cobras, and various factions of the Vice Lords, many of which trace their histories as far back as the 1950s and 1960s (Dawley, 1992; Fry, 1973; Hagedorn, 2006a, 2008). In recent years, moreover, Chicago has received extensive national media coverage related to its persistently-high levels of violence (Abbey, Smith, & Rosenbaum, 2012; S. Cohen, 2012; Kotlowitz & James, 2011; Simon, 2012; Slevin, 2012; Zamost, Griffin, & Nunez, 2012). Although on a per-capita basis, levels of violence in Chicago are much lower than cities such as New Orleans, St. Louis, Detroit, and Baltimore, Chicago experienced more homicides than any other city in the United States in both 2012 and 2013 and has maintained a homicide rate approximately twice as high as that of Los Angeles and three times that of New

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1 As suggested earlier in the chapter, however, such gang statistics should be interpreted with due caution.
York, the cities most comparable to Chicago in terms of size and, historically, homicide rate (FBI, 2016). Much of this violence has been attributed to the city’s gangs. Indeed, the Chicago Police Department (2013) has cited “street gang altercations” as the primary motive for homicide in the city since at least 1991.

Yet, in spite of recent media coverage related to gangs and violence in Chicago, little empirical research has been conducted exploring the current dynamics within the city’s street gangs and the ways in which these dynamics shape the violence in which their members are involved. What little research does exist on these topics, moreover, indicates that there may be important differences in these phenomena as they exist today as compared to the late-twentieth century (see Hagedorn, 2015; Hagedorn & Rauch, 2007; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Ralph, 2010, 2014). Indeed, as described above, the dynamics of gangs and violence that I witnessed in my own experiences working with gang members and other young people on Chicago’s South Side certainly did not match the descriptions of these phenomena within the existing literature, which largely focused on the 1990s. Given the dearth of recent research in these areas, as well as the marginalization of the perspectives of gang members themselves with respect to these issues, appropriate strategies for addressing gangs and violence in Chicago remain unclear. The current study addresses these gaps in the existing literature by utilizing an inductive approach to address the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What are the current dynamics within Chicago’s African American street gangs?

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2 Homicide is not only the most severe form of violence, but it is also the most consistently reported and recorded crime across jurisdictions (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994). Moreover, homicide “represents a reasonable proxy for violent crime in general and…. provides valuable insights into the nature and extent of this wider concern” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011, p. 15).

3 The earliest year for which this data was available.
2. What is the nature of the violence in which members of these gangs are involved?

3. Given the current gang dynamics, the nature of the violence in which gang members are involved, as well as gang members’ own perspectives on the matter, in what ways might this violence be reduced?
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this study employs a conceptual perspective that understands street gangs and gang violence as dynamic, historical phenomena. Using Hagedorn’s (2006a) “Race Not Space: A Revisionist History of Gangs in Chicago” as a model, then, this chapter will employ a sociohistorical perspective to explore the ways in which street gangs in Chicago and the violence in which they have been involved have evolved over the course of the twentieth century. The few research studies on gangs and gang violence in Chicago that have been conducted in the early twenty-first century will also be examined. To be certain, the following review of the literature parallels and draws upon existing treatments of Chicago gang history (Diamond, 2009; Hagedorn, 2006a, 2015; Perkins, 1987), both in terms of their content as well as their framing of the topic in terms of major historical periods. Given this study’s conceptual framing, however, a critical, sociohistorical examination of the literature on Chicago street gangs seemed the most appropriate way to organize this analysis. Indeed, as will be demonstrated and discussed in the chapters to follow, an understanding of this history is essential to interpreting the findings from this study—that is, to developing an accurate understanding of contemporary gang dynamics in Chicago.

The literature review below is divided into five chronological sections, each of which corresponds with a major historical transition in Chicago’s gang landscape. Each of these sections begins with a brief analysis of major social, political, and economic historical developments that helped shape the nature of gangs and gang violence during that period.4 Major trends in gang research will also be woven into the review, as applicable. It is important

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4 Obviously, an exhaustive accounting of all of these sociohistorical factors is beyond the scope of this review. However, some context is certainly necessary in order to appreciate the reality that gangs are fundamentally shaped by historical forces.
to note, however, that the chronological sections of gang history described below are not intended to represent mutually exclusive historical eras, and the discussions of street gangs within these sections do not necessarily represent universal truths about every gang in the city during these respective periods. Moreover, all research on these groups will not receive equal consideration in this review. Rather, in attempting to analyze and synthesize nearly a century of gang research in Chicago and to delineate major themes within this history, those studies that illustrate the historical nature of the city’s street gangs will be given greater weight in the discussion below.

**Social Disorganization and Street Corner Groups in the Early Twentieth Century**

The first half of the twentieth century was characterized by an unprecedented wave of urbanization in the United States. Thriving urban industrial hubs brought millions of Southern black migrants and European immigrants to bustling cities in the Midwest and Northeast in search of employment opportunities and escape from various forms of oppression and persecution (Grossman, 1989; Hirschman & Mogford, 2009; Tolnay & Beck, 1992). Yet, the rapid advances in industry, transportation, and communication that sparked this surge of urbanization were also accompanied by a breakdown in traditional forms of social controls and in the efficacy of social institutions, leading to what sociologists from the University of Chicago termed “social disorganization” (Park, 1925, p. 107). These conditions, however, did not characterize all areas of these cities, but rather existed specifically in the “zones of deterioration” (Burgess, 1925, p. 54) adjacent to the central business districts, which were characterized by encroaching industry, the oldest and most dilapidated housing stock, severe overcrowding, and high levels of poverty. The inhabitants of these neighborhoods tended to be the most recent arrivals to the city and were the most impoverished, least skilled, and least familiar with and least
prepared to adapt to urban life. Residence in these zones of deterioration was typically viewed as temporary, as residents moved into better neighborhoods as they successfully acclimated to city life. This progression fostered low levels of neighborhood attachment, weak social bonds between neighbors, and ambiguous attachment to mainstream social values and institutions (Burgess, 1925; Park, 1952).

It was from this nascent urban ecological framework of the (University of) Chicago School of sociology that Thrasher (1927) embarked on his landmark study of the city’s street gangs, widely considered the foundation upon which modern gang research has been built. Indeed, Thrasher concluded that the gang phenomenon was inherently linked to the particular conditions of the zones of deterioration (alternately referred to as zones in transition or interstitial areas), declaring that: “The gang… almost invariably… occupies what is often called ‘the poverty belt’—a region characterized by deteriorating neighborhoods, shifting populations, and the mobility and disorganization of the slum” (p. 22). More precisely, Thrasher argued that the social disorganization that characterized these communities undermined the collective ability of their residents to effectively supervise adolescent peer groups and socialize neighborhood youth according to conventional social standards, resulting, in turn, in elevated levels of juvenile delinquency. Other studies of truancy, delinquency, and criminality carried out by Thrasher’s Chicago School colleagues during the first half of the twentieth century likewise linked these phenomena with the zones of deterioration that Thrasher had identified as Chicago’s gangland (Shaw, 1929; Shaw & McKay, 1942, 1969). In one such study, moreover, Shaw (1929) noted that: “It is probably significant that most of the boys appearing in the Juvenile Court are members of delinquent gangs” (p. 205).
Yet, Thrasher’s (1927) study of *The Gang* was not limited to an ecological examination of gang geography; he painted a rich and holistic portrait of these groups and their members that included an analysis of seemingly every dimension of these phenomena. Although he observed a great deal of variation in the various gangs that he studied, Thrasher noted that the vast majority of gangs arose out of unsupervised childhood playgroups that “formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict” (p. 57). Accordingly, the size of these gangs was typically modest, with approximately half of the nearly 900 gangs on which there was such data having 15 members or less. The level of organization within these groups was generally rudimentary, although all groups seemed to have a recognized leader who wielded a fair amount of power among his comrades. Most of these gangs were comprised of second-generation pre-adolescent and adolescent children of the various European immigrant groups pouring into Chicago during this period. Although in some cases ethnic antagonisms existed between young gang members of different ethnic backgrounds, nearly 40% of the gangs in Thrasher’s study were distinctly interethnic, and many more gangs who were dominated by one ethnic group had small numbers of members with different backgrounds. The high level of ethnic mixing within Chicago’s gangs during this period reflected the reality that European immigrants overwhelmingly lived in neighborhoods that contained residents from a variety of immigrant groups (Lieberson, 1963; Philpott, 1978). The exception to this ethnic mixing, both in terms of residence and with respect to gang composition, was the exclusion of African Americans, a reality that will be elaborated upon below.

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The territories of Chicago’s early twentieth century gangs were typically quite small and often consisted of no more than a street corner or a vacant lot. The circumscribed nature of gang turfs was at least partially a byproduct of the severely overcrowded conditions that existed within the city’s slums. Thrasher (1927), thus, described the essential dilemma with which these groups were faced as “the struggle for existence,” as gangs were in a seemingly-constant state of conflict with one another over access to the few recreational spaces to which they might stake a claim within their congested neighborhoods. He described the gang warfare of the early decades of the twentieth century as follows:

In its struggle for existence a gang has to fight hostile groups to maintain its play privileges, its property rights, and the physical safety of its members. Its status as a gang among gangs, as well as in the neighborhood and the community, must also be maintained, usually through its prowess in a fight…. Gang warfare is usually organized on a territorial basis. Each group becomes attached to a local area which it regards as peculiarly its own and through which it is dangerous for members of another gang to pass. (Thrasher, 1927, p. 174)

Evident in Thrasher’s account of gang violence during this period are also at least two significant variations from the portrayal above. One such variation involved the wars between Chicago’s beer-running gangs during Prohibition in the 1920s and early 1930s. Although these beer wars were much more organized and deadly than typical the gang warfare of this period, these gangland campaigns were carried out by “criminal gangs” associated with various organized crime syndicates, which constituted a relatively small percentage of the gangs in his study (see also Landesco, 1929; Lombardo, 2013).

A close reading of Thrasher’s (1927) study, however, also hints at the centrality of racial antagonism as a basis for gang violence. Indeed, he noted that the most virulent gang violence of this period were the race riots of 1919, which began when a black youth drowned in a hail of stones hurled at him by white beach-goers after he swam into an area of a South Side beach that
had been informally designated for white use only. Rioting ensued, lasting for over a week and resulting in 38 deaths, with 23 of those killed being African American, and over 500 injuries, more than two-thirds of which were sustained by blacks (Tuttle, 1996). In their investigation of the riots, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations (1922) concluded that: “Gangs and their activities were an important factor throughout the riot. But for them it is doubtful if the riot would have gone beyond the first clash… Gangs whose activities figured so prominently in the riot were all white gangs, or ‘athletic clubs’” (pp. 11–12). Thrasher, for his part, reported that:

The most important colored-white frontier in Chicago is that on the western boundary of the Black Belt.6 Clashes occurred along this boundary for many years before the race riots of 1919 and they have continued since… giving the area of friction the character of a frontier between white and black districts. (p. 202)

Diamond (2009), on the other hand, offered a very different interpretation of gang violence in Chicago during the early twentieth century than the one presented by Thrasher (1927). In his historical examination of Chicago’s street gangs from 1908 to 1969, Diamond contended that much of the city’s gang violence during the period that preceded World War II, where it was not explicitly motivated by racial antagonisms, nonetheless possessed a distinctive racial dimension. More precisely, he argued that, within a context of racial uncertainty, economic insecurity, and emerging pressures to participate in various forms of commercial leisure, gang culture and gang violence played a vital role in the construction of identity among youth from various European ethnic backgrounds. As Diamond explained:

What Thrasher could not see in an era long before scholars began to historicize the instability of the racial category of whiteness was that the primary ethnic groups of gangland were also racially interstitial and that so many of their “territorial” conflicts were in many ways struggles to negotiate and define their place within the racial hierarchy. It did not occur to the Chicago School that many of the gang conflicts they observed were actually the everyday vicissitudes of a process of Americanization at the grassroots level. (p. 61)

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6 A reference to Chicago’s historic black South Side ghetto, which was also known as Bronzeville (see Drake & Cayton, 1993; Spear, 1967).
In this way, violence by youth gangs comprised of members of European ethnic groups that had not yet been fully accepted as white, including Irish, Italians, Poles, and various eastern European populations, was used as a means of resolving issues of racial and national identity and staking claims to whiteness. This was particularly true of violence undertaken by these groups against African Americans, who occupied the lowest rung on America’s racial hierarchy and from whom ethnic Europeans most wanted to distance themselves.

**Racial Succession and Policing the Color Line in Postwar Chicago**

Spurred by the economic expansion brought about by the United States’ involvement in World War II, the 1940s and 1950s saw more than half a million African Americans, 40,000 Mexicans, and 32,000 Puerto Ricans migrate to Chicago, effectively tripling the city’s black and Mexican populations and establishing its Puerto Rican community (Fernández, 2012; George, 2009). This massive influx, the utter lack of housing construction during the Great Depression, and the return of tens of thousands of veterans following the end of the war created an unprecedented housing crisis in the city. This housing shortage was felt most acutely by the city’s rapidly-growing African American population, who had long been confined to an overcrowded South Side ghetto through a combination of discriminatory housing policies, restrictive covenants, and racial violence. During the postwar period, however, the rigid boundaries of the black ghetto began to crumble as African Americans spilled over into the neighborhoods on the edges of the historic Black Belt and formed another colony on the city’s

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7 To be certain, a number of additional factors influenced the migration of these groups to Chicago and other U.S. cities in the Midwest, Northeast, Midwest, and West. For African Americans, these factors included oppressive Jim Crow laws, widespread racial violence, and the mechanization of agriculture (Fligstein, 1981; Grossman, 1989; Holley, 2000; Tolnay, 2003). For Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, these factors included the disruption of native economies due to the penetration of U.S. corporate interests and the U.S. government’s collaborative efforts with Mexican and Puerto Rican officials to bring cheap sources of labor to American cities (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Fernández, 2010, 2012; Padilla, 1987; Pérez, 2004).
West Side (Hirsch, 1998; Seligman, 2005). With the assistance of discriminatory federal housing policies that subsidized suburban development and underwrote mortgage loans for millions of white citizens while systematically denying blacks access to these new suburbs and to mortgage insurance, whites abandoned their former neighborhoods en masse and fled to the burgeoning suburbs (Hirsch, 2000; Jackson, 1985; Kimble, 2007). In 1940, the residents of seven community areas adjacent to the historic South Side ghetto were, on average, 92% white; by 1960, these communities were 83% black (Chicago Fact Book Consortium, 1984). Overall, the city lost more than 400,000 white residents and its proportion of African American residents increased from 8% to 23% (Hirsch, 1998).

The process of racial succession in formerly-white Chicago neighborhoods, however, was far from uncontested. The city’s political elites used urban renewal projects, public housing policy, and the geographically-strategic construction of large interstate highways in attempts to perpetuate residential segregation. White residents of these communities, moreover, employed methods of their own in attempting to discourage and impede the entry of African Americans into their neighborhoods. Primary among these methods of white resistance was the use of racial violence against blacks who moved into these communities. In his seminal study of race and housing in Chicago, Hirsch (1998) described the postwar period as “an era of hidden violence” characterized by “a pattern of chronic urban guerrilla warfare” (pp. 40–41). Indeed, in just a six-year period from 1945 to 1950, he found that nearly 500 incidents of racial violence were reported to the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, with approximately two-thirds of these incidents occurring in the areas bordering the Black Belt and more than 85% taking place on the periphery of the city’s various black enclaves. These incidents were almost uniformly

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8 A number of other factors buttressed the development of suburbs throughout the United States, including increasing rates of car ownership and the advent of the interstate highway system (Jackson, 1985).
sparked by the arrival of a black family in an all-white neighborhood, where their new neighbors greeted them with physical violence, the firebombing of their houses and the otherwise destruction of their property, and full-blown race riots of varying severity, scale, and duration. Hirsch described these race riots, of which there were seven between 1945 and 1960, as “communal” in nature, with regard to both the demographics and the residential geography of their participants: “Active mob members, almost inevitably residents of the areas involved, were demographically, ethnically, and economically representative of their neighborhoods” (p. 69).

Diamond (2009), on the other hand, contended that white youth gangs played a much more central role in the racial violence of this era than Hirsch (1998) had concluded. In order to explore the role of white youth gangs in this violence, Diamond analyzed archival data, including police arrest records, firsthand accounts, and secondary reports of the seven major disturbances described by Hirsch as well as other, more common incidents of racial violence during this period. He reported that the archival records of each of the major riots supported an interpretation of white youth gangs as their central and most violent participants. In the Fernwood Park riot, for example, 18 of the 23 individuals arrested during the first nights of violence were white youth between the ages of 15 and 22, and a report from the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations noted the collaboration between local youth and gangs from a nearby community in carrying out the most severe violence in the riot. Similarly, the 33 rioters arrested during a disturbance in Englewood were overwhelmingly between 17 and 22 years of age, and various official reports on the incident identified youth gangs, specifically, as central to

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9 Similarly, in just the two year period of 1956–1957, the Chicago Urban League reported 164 incidents of racial violence, which, with a few notable exceptions, also overwhelmingly occurred on the fringes of expanding black areas of residence (Drake & Cayton, 1993).
both the formation and violent mobilization of the mob.\textsuperscript{10} Diamond concluded that, although these large-scale racial disturbances involved sizable and heterogeneous white crowds that shared common sentiments of racism and the common goal of maintaining racial segregation, white youth gangs constituted the major catalysts of violence in these incidents:

While it would be erroneous to view them as marginal or extreme elements of their communities, it would be just as misleading to overlook the fact that young men in their late teens and early twenties were indeed the core actors in the local mobs that assembled for those demonstrations of racial hatred…. The overall pattern of antiblack violence from the late 1940s, including both the crowd demonstrations and the many smaller incidents… indicates that youth groups, whether just neighborhood cliques or more tangibly defined as gangs or clubs, were the most vigilant and the most effective entities in consolidating and maintaining struggles for racial separation. (pp. 162, 165)

Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, moreover, were not immune from being victimized by such racialized gang violence. Diamond (2009) found that violence perpetrated by white gangs against Latino youth to be common near every major Mexican and Puerto Rican enclave, and particularly common on the city’s Near West Side, where ethnic whites, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans all lived in close proximity to one another. Such violence was particularly common for Puerto Ricans, whose generally darker skin and often-distinguishable African ancestry frequently resulted in the type of acute hostility typically reserved for their African American counterparts. For example, Diamond described the centrality of white gangs in the terrorizing of Puerto Ricans on the Near Northwest Side, which included a lethal arson campaign in which three people were killed between 1954 and 1955, that was clearly discernible in attempts to ameliorate the situation:

Neighborhood street gangs had played active roles in mounting this community resistance—a situation that prompted youth worker Dan Nagle’s efforts to organize the Northwest Youth Council, a federation of some fifteen gangs with more than 300 members, as a means of restoring peace to the area. (p. 199)

\textsuperscript{10} Diamond (2009) noted that this arrest data was for the third night of the disturbance, after “police stopped taking in victims and counterdemonstrators from outside the neighborhood” (p. 4).
Mexican youth, on the other hand, often bore closer physical resemblance to Italians, Greeks, and other southern and eastern Europeans than to African Americans or even darker-skinned Puerto Ricans. In turn, Diamond reported, Mexicans were sometimes the targets of white ethnic gang violence, while in other instances they joined whites in perpetrating violence against blacks and Puerto Ricans. On the Near West Side, for example, Mexican youth often joined forces with their Italian counterparts in assaultive campaigns against Puerto Ricans. Similarly, Mexican youth, who had long been the target of Polish, Italian, and Slavic hostilities on the city’s far Southeast Side, joined these ethnic whites in harassing and assaulting blacks during the Calumet Park disturbance in 1957 (Diamond, 2009; see also Fernández, 2012).

The racial violence of white ethnic gangs within Chicago’s racially-transitioning communities, moreover, often served as the galvanizing force in the defensive formation of black and Latino youth gangs in these areas. Diamond (2009) also noted that these dynamics inspired and intensified new forms of racial consciousness among young gang members of color as the 1950s wore on: “If gangs had served to crystallize sentiments of community solidarity and resistance to ethnic and racial prejudice for European Americans in the interwar period, they were coming to play a similar role for some black communities” (p. 217). This account of the role that white racial violence played in the emergence of black and Latino street gangs in racially-contested communities is supported by findings from a number of other historical studies that explore the process by which these gangs were formed. In his history of Chicago’s Vice Lords, for example, Hagedorn (2008) quoted one of the gang’s founders, who described the role that white aggression played in the formation of his West Side gang as follows:

During the summer, we would have to walk through the majority white neighborhood to get to the swimming pool. These would be adult whites as well as young white boys our age. The adults would urge them on to attack us…. The word got around the neighborhood that my brothers and me had the courage to fight the whites, so other
brothers would join us to go swimming. So in that time we became recognized as a gang. We were forced to band together for protection. (Hagedorn, 2008, p. 76; see also Perkins, 1987)

In addition, Fernández (2012) described a similar dynamic in her historical account of Chicago’s Latino community in the postwar era, noting that: “Just as white male youth served as the physical enforcers of community boundaries for white families, Puerto Rican youth gangs often originated or initially served as a defensive body to protect themselves from white hostility” (pp. 157–158). It was within this context of ethnoracial violence that what Diamond (2009) described as a “fighting-gang subculture…. predicated on the articulation of racial alterity through collective acts of violence” (p. 209, 217) emerged in racially contested communities throughout Chicago during the 1950s.

**Street Organizations and Gang Nations During the Civil Rights Era**

The dynamics of racial succession that had radically refashioned Chicago’s racial composition during the postwar period continued unabated into the 1960s, when the city lost more than half a million whites and gained nearly 300,000 African Americans and 100,000 Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (Fernández, 2012; Gibson & Jung, 2005). The South Side and West Side black ghettos, thus, continued their rapid expansion, and distinctive Puerto Rican and Mexican enclaves, or *barrios*, were established on the city’s Near Northwest and Near Southwest Sides, respectively (Chicago Fact Book Consortium, 1984; Fernández, 2012). As whites fled Chicago for the suburbs, white gangs increasingly, although not entirely, disappeared from the city’s gang landscape. During the 1960s, moreover, the progressive social movements of the time, including the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, the Chicano Movement, and the movement for Puerto Rican independence, swept through cities across the country, including
Chicago (Fernández, 2012; Sugrue, 2008; Williams, 2013). As will be described below, these movements had a tremendous impact on the city’s street gangs.

Despite the widespread and elemental social upheaval that characterized this period, however, most of the research conducted on street gangs in Chicago during this time failed to investigate the effects of this sweeping social change on the city’s gangs. As most of this research was rooted in the Chicago’s School’s urban ecological paradigm, it generally proceeded from the assumption that there was little to distinguish urban life during the 1960s from that of the 1920s. Short and Strodtbeck (1965), for example, completed an ambitious study on *Group Process and Gang Delinquency* that tested a number of existing gang theories and offered an in-depth analysis of the internal workings of these groups using survey data from nearly 400 youth and extensive field observations. Suttles’s (1968, 1972) rich ethnographic study of social organization within a segregated, multiracial/ethnic slum area on Chicago’s Near West Side, on the other hand, emphasized the ways in which street gangs represented a natural and useful adaptation to the ecological particularities of marginalized neighborhoods. Horowitz (1983), who conducted an ethnographic study of a Mexican American community, emphasized the tensions between Chicano and American cultural prerogatives, particularly the former’s emphasis on honor and its role in the development and persistence of street gangs and incidents of gang violence. In short, these research studies, while insightful and well regarded in their own rights, failed to document the tremendous developments taking place among Chicago’s street gangs during the 1960s, instead focusing on the advancement of more “universal” truths about these groups.

Diamond’s (2009) treatment of Chicago gang history, on the other hand, offered a nuanced sociohistorical analysis of the dynamics emerging within the city’s gangs during the
turbulent 1960s, in particular the rapid expansion and federation of a number of these groups as well as their increasing politicization. Although gang violence driven by ethnoracial tensions continued in areas that remained racially contested, like the Near West Side, increasing levels of racial homogeneity within the rapidly expanding black ghetto did not bring about a parallel decline in the fighting-gang subculture that had taken root in these areas. More precisely, Diamond argued that within a terrain characterized by the uncertainty that accompanied the rapid racial and economic transformations of these neighborhoods, black street gangs waged often-violent recruitment campaigns in an attempt to swell their ranks and territories. Diamond explained this process as follows:

The rapid proliferation of fighting gangs in… black ghetto neighborhood[s] had led to the spread of coercive recruitment campaigns and a veritable arms race on the streets…. Violence was thus an important means of expanding ranks and maintaining discipline [in] areas like Woodlawn on the South Side and Lawndale on the West Side, where gangs engaged in deadly fights to the finish…. The gangs could not afford to lose unaffiliated youths to their rivals, and they could never be certain a group of teens refusing to join them would not at some point run with their enemies. (pp. 214–215, 264)

In this way, gangs such as the Vice Lords, Blackstone Rangers, Disciples, and Egyptian Cobras coercively recruited unaffiliated neighborhood youth and incorporated other, smaller and weaker gangs who were unable to maintain their independence. The latter practice, in particular, resulted in a distinct pattern of gang federation, in which once-independent gangs were able to maintain elements of their former identities under the banner of these burgeoning gang “nations,” a nod to the Black Nationalist rhetoric of the period. The Rangers, for example, had formally incorporated 21 notable street gangs and created the Main 21, a governing board consisting of the chiefs of each of these gangs, while the Vice Lords boasted upwards of 20 chapters in the greater North Lawndale area; the memberships of each of these gangs was estimated at between 1,500 and 3,000. Thus, it was within these frontier communities, not the historic black ghetto,
that Chicago’s enduring gang nations were born. As Diamond noted, however, not all of these recruitment efforts were coercive in nature:

As nation gangs like the Vice Lords, the Rangers, the Disciples, and the Cobras began to expand, their ability to accomplish their recruitment objectives without resorting to violence naturally increased. Yet other significant factors accounted for why these gangs gained adherents so rapidly in these years…. One of these was the emergence of an enlightened and charismatic set of leaders who recognized larger goals than the mere accumulation of muscle on the streets and who viewed themselves as “organizing” or “building something” rather than just recruiting. Another was the realization among more and more youth that joining these gangs was the most promising avenue to empowerment—an idea that in itself was moving somewhat away from traditional conceptions of manhood and street respect and toward a mix of Black Power ideas involving racial unity, the struggle for civil rights, community control, and black entrepreneurialism. (p. 265)

Indeed, Diamond contended the Black Freedom Movement had a distinct, if brief, influence on Chicago’s burgeoning black street gangs and their respective leadership, serving as a catalyst for their politicization and increasing involvement in grassroots sociopolitical action during the latter half of the 1960s. For example, Diamond documented a range of such activities among the city’s street gangs, from their involvement in organizing school boycotts in protest of intolerable learning conditions to their participation in the nonviolent marches organized by Martin Luther King, Jr., in segregated neighborhoods on the city’s Southwest Side. Much of his analysis, however, focused particularly on the Blackstone Rangers of the South Side’s Woodlawn community, who had refashioned themselves as the Black P. Stone Nation during this period. Diamond described the integral involvement of the Stones and Disciples in the Youth Job Project, a War on Poverty initiative run by the radical Alinskyite Woodlawn Organization and funded by the federal Office of Economic Opportunity to the tune of nearly $1 million. In response to increasing hostility from Chicago’s Democratic machine and police department, moreover, he noted that the Stones helped organize a boycott of the city’s 1967 Chicago mayoral election, which brought about a precipitous decline in black voter support for Mayor Richard J.
Daley. In addition, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., as riots raged on the city’s West Side, the Stones helped keep the streets of the South Side calm (for more on the history of the Black P. Stones during this period, see Fish, 1973; Fry, 1973; McPherson, 1970; N. Moore & Williams).

Dawley’s (1992) *A Nation of Lords: The Autobiography of the Vice Lords* and Hagedorn’s (2008) history of the gang, on the other hand, documented the more fundamental transformation of the Vice Lords of the West Side’s North Lawndale Community. Dawley, a Peace Corps alumnus, helped the gang incorporate with the state of Illinois as a not-for-profit organization, Conservative Vice Lords, Inc. (CVL). Over the next few years, CVL applied for and received a number of grants from private foundations, including the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, as well as Operation Bootstrap, a coalition of local businesses, for economic development and community improvement. Dawley and Hagedorn described how CVL turned these grants into an assortment of businesses located near the intersection of 16th Street and Lawndale Avenue, their traditional base of operations and one of the most infamous street corners in Chicago. These establishments included: Teen Town, an ice cream parlor; the African Lion, a clothing store that sold Afro-centric garb; two Tastee Freez restaurants; a Leadership Training Institute; the House of Lords, a pool hall and “hang-in” for neighborhood youth; and Art & Soul, an art studio and gallery operated in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art. The Lords also established a number of initiatives to organize and provide services to the community, including the Street Academy G.E.D. program, the “Grass not Glass” community clean-up campaign, and a partnership with the West Side Community Development Corporation. Additionally, their Tenants’ Rights Action Group worked to fight against slumlords and block illegal evictions, successfully stopping 43 such evictions by 1969 and
ultimately winning 11 related court decisions. CVL even published a Report to the Public in 1969 detailing its transformation, listing its initiatives and accomplishments, and providing a thorough overview of its budget, which had exceeded $120,000. Upon returning to North Lawndale in 1968, Keiser (1979), an ethnographer who had completed work with the Vice Lords just two years earlier that had emphasized their penchant for violence, remarked: “The Vice Lord social and cultural systems must have undergone basic and radical changes. The inflow of a large amount of money from government sources coupled with the complete termination of gang fighting… have had a profound impact on the group” (p. 11).

In an historical examination of the struggle to integrate Chicago’s notoriously discriminatory construction industry during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Gellman (2010) documented the indispensable involvement of the city’s three largest street gangs, the Vice Lords, Black P. Stones, and Black Gangster Disciples, in these efforts. More specifically, these gangs had been recruited into this struggle by the Coalition for United Community Action (CUCA), an alliance of 61 African American organizations united around the common goal of demanding equal employment for blacks in the city’s construction industry, from which they had been systematically barred. The three gangs agreed to partner with CUCA and together formed the LSD (Lords, Stones, and Disciples) coalition in 1969 as a symbol of unity and common purpose. As Gellman explained, LSD played a vital role in CUCA’s strategy: “The legion of organizations in CUCA made jobs into a salient issue, but it was its gang participation that drove its activism. The street gangs, one CUCA leader concluded, put the ‘troops in the field’” (p. 114). Specifically, CUCA strategy involved the use of guerrilla ambush tactics, in which dozens of gang members and other activists overtook city construction sites, thereby forcing work stoppages. These tactics proved tremendously successful, resulting in shutdowns at “twenty-four
federal construction sites in Chicago totaling more than $80 million in building contracts” (Gellman, 2010, p. 121) during the summer of 1969. These work stoppages, moreover, jeopardized another $38 million in federal funds earmarked for Chicago. The powerful Mayor Richard J. Daley and the city of Chicago were forced to negotiate, eventually coming to terms with CUCA on the “Chicago Plan” in January 1970, which called for 1,000 qualified minority journeymen to go to work immediately and become members of their respective trade unions, the training of 1,000 minority 17- to 24-year-olds (the age group of the three gangs), and 1,000 on-the-job trainees who would not be required to take tests to enter their chosen trade. (Gellman, 2010, p. 126; see also Dawley, 1992; Fry, 1973)

Fernández (2012) described a similar process of politicization and grassroots sociopolitical activism among the Puerto Rican Young Lords Organization during this period. The Young Lords gang had formed during the late 1950s as a defensive reaction to racial violence directed at Puerto Rican youth in the Lincoln Park community on Chicago’s Near North Side. Inspired by the social movements of the time, however, the gang reconstituted itself as a prosocial grassroots organization in the late 1960s. Fernández (2012), for example, described the politicization of José “Cha Cha” Jiménez, the leader of the Young Lords, as follows:

Jiménez soon returned to prison, but he began encountering the influence of black Muslims and started reading about Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Puerto Rican nationalist hero Pedro Albizu Campos, and the massacre of Ponce, Puerto Rico. He began developing some awareness of the inequalities that Puerto Ricans had suffered and the colonial status of the island. When he was released from jail in January 1968, he had a newfound emerging consciousness. (p. 182)

In addition to the influence of progressive social movements, however, a number of pressing issues facing Chicago’s Puerto Rican community during this period provided the impetus behind the Young Lords’ transformation, in particular, the threat of gentrification and Puerto Rican displacement in Lincoln Park. The Lords’ campaign to fight the city’s efforts to gentrify their neighborhood, which were framed under the guide of urban renewal, involved a wide range of
tactics, including vandalism, sit-ins, and other forms of disruptive protest. In addition to protesting gentrification, moreover, the Young Lords waged proactive campaigns to promote low-income housing and to protest police brutality. They also established a number of free community service programs modeled after those of the Black Panther Party, including a medical clinic, daycare center, and breakfast program for children. Indeed, the Lords expressed a leftist, revolutionary ideology informed by that of the Panthers, and formed a “Rainbow Coalition” with the Panthers and the Young Patriots, a group of Appalachian white youth based out of Uptown on the city’s North Side. The Lords also established working relationships and collaborated with a wide variety of progressive groups in and around Lincoln Park during the late 1960s and early 1970s, from BAD (Black, Active, and Determined), an organization from the Cabrini-Green housing projects, to DePaul University’s chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (for more on the history of the Young Lords, see Enck-Wanzer, 2010).

**Gang Corporatization in the Hyperghetto**

The course of politicization upon which Chicago’s African American and Latino street gangs had set themselves in the late 1960s, however, was fundamentally disrupted by a number of factors coming to bear on these organizations and on the city’s black and Latinos communities. In a culmination of increasing hostility toward the city’s politicizing black and Latino gangs, Mayor Richard J. Daley officially declared “war on gangs” in 1969, intensifying a campaign of suppression that included police harassment, infiltration and internal disruption, the sabotage of prosocial gang endeavors, and the regular arrests of gang leaders on flimsy or entirely fabricated criminal charges (Dawley, 1992; Fry, 1973; Gellman, 2010; Hagedorn, 2006a, 2008). These efforts reflected not only the state’s practice of disrupting progressive organizations of color, but also coincided with the early stages of the mass incarceration of
minority populations, particularly African American men, that intensified during the final three decades of the twentieth century (Alexander, 2010; Wacquant, 2000). At the same time, economic restructuring led to near-wholesale deindustrialization in many U.S. cities, including Chicago, which lost nearly 350,000 blue collar jobs between 1954 and 1982, 63% of all such positions (Wacquant & Wilson, 1989). The burden of deindustrialization fell most heavily on the African American working class, for which manufacturing jobs had long constituted a rare form of relatively accessible employment, leading to skyrocketing rates of unemployment and poverty in Chicago’s black ghetto (Drake & Cayton, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996). As these dynamics crystallized, the city’s black communities were increasingly unable to sustain their basic institutions, such as churches and businesses, the closures of which exacerbated the decline of these neighborhoods (Wacquant, 2008; Wilson, 1987, 1996). These worsening conditions were further exacerbated by the retrenchment of the welfare state, perhaps most notably in federal funding for public housing, which was slashed by more than 75% under President Ronald Reagan alone, causing Chicago’s projects to fall into complete and utter disrepair (Venkatesh, 2000). Finally, the decline of Chicago’s black communities in the post-civil rights era culminated in the crack cocaine epidemic that took the city—and its gang—by storm in the late 1980s.

In his historical study of Chicago street gangs, Diamond (2009) noted that the politicization of the city’s black gangs during the civil rights era was threatened not only by police repression, but also by the “tensions developing within Chicago’s gang nations” (p. 280) between members with prosocial proclivities and those with more criminal leanings. Where Diamond’s research placed greater emphasis on the former, however, Cooley’s (2011) historical
treatment of the Black P. Stones focused on the latter. More specifically, Cooley summarized his argument in the following terms:

As historians emphasized the gangs’ “prosocial” activities, they neglected the ferocious power struggle for a stake in the underground economy. Gangs were concerned with community control, but this meant jurisdiction over prostitution, gambling, extortion, and the drug trade. Though scholars and gang members themselves have put forth a powerful mythology that stressed gangs mobilizing in the service of their communities, this rhetoric masked a turn toward collective criminal entrepreneurship beginning in the late 1960s. (p. 912)

The Stones and other black street gangs’ foray into more organized forms of criminal activity involved wresting control of these various forms of vice within their neighborhoods from the Outfit, Chicago’s mafia, an effort in which they were largely successful. However, Cooley argued, lacking black organized crime mentors and, thus, the expertise necessary to efficiently reorganize these vice enterprises, black street gangs often “turned to extreme violence, excessive recruitment programs, and unforgiving extortion schemes to take power over criminal activity” (Cooley, 2011, p. 911). These tactics, he contended, proved disastrous to their relations with the wider black community, who largely turned against the Stones and other black street gangs. Moreover, the lack of political protection enjoyed by black gangs and their interruption of existing payoff arrangements made them easy targets for a police force eager to crack down on these groups (see also Gilfoyle, Diamond, & Cooley, 2012; for a similar historical account of racial succession in organized crime in Chicago’s black neighborhoods, see Hagedorn, 2015).

Jacobs’s (1977) ethnographic study of Illinois’s Stateville penitentiary during the 1970s offered an analysis of the ascendance of Chicago’s street gangs within the state’s prisons. This takeover, he argued, was facilitated in part by calls for prison reform and administrative transparency within broader society, which curtailed the ability of prison administrators to effectively neutralize or curtail their increasing power. These gangs, thus, were able to
forcefully replace the traditional, singular inmate social hierarchy with factional hierarchies rooted in gang allegiances. Serving time became increasingly dangerous and intolerable for those unaffiliated with one of these gangs, which had effectively seized control of the prison. Unaffiliated inmates, seeking the protection afforded through membership, joined these gangs en masse, and the membership rolls of these groups skyrocketed. However, Jacobs contended that these groups functioned in other ways that made membership attractive, as well, including the various material provisions provided by gangs to their memberships and successful challenges of prison administrators. Most importantly, however, these gangs provided their members with “psychological support…. a sense of identification, a feeling of belonging, an air of importance” (Jacobs, 1977, p. 152). Indeed, by 1972, at least half of Stateville’s entire inmate population of approximately 2,000 was affiliated with one of the four largest and most powerful gangs in the Illinois penal system: the Black Gangster Disciples, Black P. Stones, Vice Lords, or Latin Kings.

In his study of a Puerto Rican street gang in Chicago, Padilla (1992) concluded that the gang operated as an ethnic enterprise organized distinctly around the sale of illicit drugs. More specifically, within a context of economic marginalization and cultural imperialism, Puerto Rican youth turned to the gang in search of economic empowerment and solidarity. Yet, the gang was structured in a vertical, corporate-style fashion, with relatively few gang leaders acting as drug wholesalers and rank-and-file gang youth working as retail-level salesmen with few opportunities for organizational mobility. Padilla described the disillusionment that many gang members experienced as these exploitive dynamics came into focus for them as well as their powerlessness to effectively challenge or alter these arrangements:

After spending years working as street-level dealers, some youngsters come to recognize that their labor has been consistently taken advantage of and exploited. They come to understand that their work has only been benefitting the gang’s mainheads, or top-level distributors and suppliers. As street-level dealers, they have become aware of their
permanent position as minimum wage earners. Against these conditions of gang domination and inequality, several members decide to cut their ties with the gang and return to the very same world they had earlier opposed. As far as they were concerned, the gang did not function as the liberating mechanism they had envisioned at an earlier time. Members of the Diamonds were able to read the contradictions that existed between the gang’s ideology of family and collectivism and the inequality produced by work relations. For them gang affiliation has led to the reproduction of yet another experience of injustice. (pp. 6–7)

Gang members, then, were essentially faced with the choice of biding their time in hopes of a promotion that would likely never come or leaving the gang altogether. Although many chose the latter path, seeking to escape perpetual and risky low-wage work in the underground economy, Padilla noted that the time they had spent in the gang had prevented them from acquiring the skills and experiences that would help them achieve success through more conventional means.

The ethnographic research conducted by Venkatesh (1997, 1998, 2000, 2006; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000) focused on various branches of the Gangster Disciples street gang in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes, a large South Side housing project. Venkatesh examined the impact of the crack cocaine epidemic on the corporatization of the Gangster Disciples and the other gangs in and around Robert Taylor and the relationships between these gangs and the wider community within which they were embedded. Like Padilla (1992), he found that these gangs were characterized by a distinctly corporate ethos. In particular, he argued that, although Chicago street gangs had been involved in drug distribution and other revenue-generating activities in the informal economy, prior to their entrée into the crack cocaine trade in the late 1980s, they had largely assumed social and supportive functions in the lives of their members. The unprecedented profit potential associated with the crack trade, however, initiated a process of fundamental transformation among these groups, which
refashioned themselves as corporate-style organizations whose leaders had unequivocally decided to prioritize business interests above all else. As Venkatesh and Levitt (2000) explained:

The citywide gang federation had left behind the skein of a youth group involved primarily in social activities, minor crimes, and delinquency. They began to resemble an organized criminal network, interested more in consolidating their position in the city’s crack-cocaine market. Once a disparate collection of neighborhood sets, with loose ties to one another and with little collaboration, local Black Kings factions were now part of an integrated hierarchy that had eerie resonance, structurally and in spirit, to a corporate franchise in which members held offices and specific roles, and each constituent set was tied to the overall organization through trademark and fiduciary responsibilities. The other large gang families in the city appeared also to be moving in a “corporatist” direction. The aura of corporatism was no less than a total change in the modus operandi of the gang, one that had rewritten the rules of involvement, reconstituted their identity and social relations, and offered different incentives, risks, and benefits for membership. (Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000, pp. 428–429)

Accordingly, the fierce gang wars fought in Robert Taylor were driven by economic interests, that is, the control of the drug markets in and around the projects. This violence had devastating consequences on the social fabric within the projects and placed tremendous strain on gang-community relations, as tenant leaders and other community actors demanded that the gang live up to their claims of community concern. In the end, however, Venkatesh concluded that, although it made some attempts to do so, the gang ultimately could not resolve this paradox, and its business interests ultimately rendered its pro-community rhetoric and overtures increasingly hollow (Venkatesh, 1997, 2000, 2006; for another account of gang violence related to drug wars in public housing, see Popkin et al., 2000).

In *The In$ane Chicago Way*, Hagedorn (2015) constructed a natural history of Spanish Growth and Development (SGD), a mafia-like commission of 20 Latin Folks gangs in Chicago, using key informant interviews with gang leaders and organized crime figures as well as an analysis of court records. The SGD coalition came together at the close of the 1980s as an attempt by Chicago’s Latin Folks gangs to organize crime, reduce gang warfare, and construct a
broader identity that would supersede their individual gang identities. Hagedorn noted that, in some ways, SGD represented an extension of the People and Folks coalitions, which gang leaders organized in Stateville prison in 1978 as a means of reducing gang violence.\footnote{The same prison in which Jacobs (1977) conducted his study.} Indeed, the Latin Folks gangs that formed SGD identified as such due to their affiliation with the Folks alliance. On the other hand, the Chicago Outfit viewed SGD as a way of extending their influence into the city’s Latino gangs and community more generally, and Outfit members attempted to provide indirect mentoring to the coalition through the C-Note$, a gang from which the Outfit recruited some of its members. Yet, the development of internal factions undermined efforts at solidarity, and a war over control of La Tabla, SGD’s governing board, eventually broke out between the coalition’s Insane, Maniac, and Almighty “families.” This war was controlled by powerful and power-thirsty gang leaders, most of whom were incarcerated, for reasons hidden from the gang soldiers who actually fought in and lost their lives during the war. Eventually, many of these leaders lost control of their own gangs, whose young members tired of the seemingly endless war. Based on this history, Hagedorn offered a number of other novel insights into gang dynamics, including the major roles played by police and political corruption in protecting gang operations and promoting violence and an analysis of organizational entropy.

**Chicago’s Street Gangs in the Twenty-First Century**

Few studies have examined Chicago street gangs or the violence in which they are involved since the turn of the twenty-first century. There are, however, a number of exceptions to this trend that will be discussed here. Hagedorn and Rauch (2007), for example, examined the effects of public housing policy and gentrification on homicide levels in New York and Chicago. The study included an analysis of homicide trends and differences in housing policy between the
two cities as well as data from qualitative interviews with 14 Chicago gang members who had either lived in public housing projects and were displaced following their demolition or were residents of receiving communities. The study revealed that the demolition of nearly all of Chicago’s housing projects since the late 1990s and the dispersal of their former residents, including gang members, to other poor communities worked to disrupt the local gang and drug ecologies of the communities that received them. More specifically, the invasion of gang members from the projects created tension and violence with gang members in receiving communities over territory and the control of drug markets. Hagedorn and Rauch contrasted Chicago’s public housing policy of wholesale demolition and displacement with New York’s policy of revitalizing public housing and argued that these differing approaches appeared to have played a role in the trajectories of these cities’ respective homicide rates, with New York’s homicide rate continuing its 1990s decline into the twenty-first century and Chicago’s homicide rate remaining relatively stable—and substantially higher—during that decade.

Ralph (2010, 2014) conducted a three-year ethnographic study with members of an institutionalized street gang on Chicago’s West Side in which he explored, in part, the gang’s conflicted history. More specifically, Ralph examined how the gang’s participation in the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s and its organized involvement in the drug trade during the 1980s and 1990s have shaped the youngest generation of members’ perceptions of the organization and their aspirations as members. The author found that older generations of gang members from both the gang’s activist and drug organization periods fondly recalled the organizational structure and cohesion of their respective eras and disparaged the younger generation(s) for not fully embracing these traditions. Youthful members, on the other hand, were forced to negotiate these contradictory historical strands within the context of a
compromised organizational structure. These dynamics have contributed to the development of a “renegade” mentality among many young gang members, that is, an outlook driven by individualism and materialism, as opposed to an allegiance to the organization.

In a refereed journal article, edited volume, and authored book, Hagedorn (2006, 2007, 2008) introduced a number of theoretical concepts in attempting to broaden traditional criminological understandings of street gangs. These works were largely based on historical work that the author conducted on Chicago street gangs and his work as part of an international study of children involved in armed conflict, both of which included qualitative interviews with gang members. By examining the role that race has played in the development and trajectory of gangs in Chicago throughout the twentieth century, Hagedorn’s (2006a) “Revisionist History of Gangs in Chicago” challenged deracialized theories of gangs that have been the hallmark of gang research since the 1920s. His subsequent edited volume, *Gangs in the Global City* (Hagedorn, 2007), examined the ways in which exclusionary and revanchist neoliberal policies and practices are shaping globalizing cities and the forms and functions of the street gangs that operate within them. Finally, his book, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (2008), brought many of these themes together and called for an understanding of U.S. street gangs as part of a broader phenomenon within global cities worldwide of “armed groups that occupy the uncontrolled spaces of a ‘world of slums’…. [and] are shaped by racial and ethnic oppression, as well as poverty and slums, and are reactions of despair to persisting inequality” (p. xxiv).

Hagedorn (2008), however, argued that hip hop music, despite the destructiveness often evident in much of its commercialized gangsta forms, has the potential to act as a powerful conduit for engaging gang members in resisting and challenging the structural and institutional oppression
that shape and reinforce the oppressive conditions out of which they develop and in which they operate.

Harkness (2013), in turn, examined the relationships between street gangs and local gangsta rappers in Chicago. During a seven-year ethnographic study of the Chicago hip hop music scene, the author conducted interviews with 135 local rappers, 23 of which self-identified as gang members and eight more who were enmeshed in these networks but were not official gang members. Gang members, he found, had largely internalized the “rap hustler” (p. 102) archetype popularized by various gangsta rappers and viewed rap music as a way to escape poverty and achieve fame and wealth. Harkness described the relationship between these artists and their street gangs as “symbiotic”:

Rappers who were gang members used gang affiliation to generate revenue, promote and market their music, recruit band members, and provide security at live concerts. The gangs relied on these rappers as a source of income, for promotion and marketing, as a recruitment tool, and as a means by which to wage rivalries and settle disputes. (p. 163)

These rappers’ relationships with their respective street gangs, however, also proved detrimental at times for a variety of reasons, including the threat and occurrence of violence, which often constricted potential collaborations and opportunities to earn money, and the omnipresent possibility of incarceration. Consequently, these artists utilized a wide range of risk-management strategies in order to mitigate the potential hazards associated with gang membership within Chicago’s local gangsta rap microscene, including the selective communication of their gang affiliations and strategic collaborations with members of other gangs.

Summary and Discussion

The preceding literature review, which was organized as a historical analysis of Chicago gang history, demonstrated some of the major trends in the city’s gang history over the last
century or so as well as the ways in which broad social, political, and economic changes have shaped this history in various ways. The post-civil rights era, for example, saw Chicago’s black street gangs transform into corporate-style, drug-selling street organizations. These gangs engaged in wars that were controlled by powerful gang leaders and were waged over the control of drug markets and power on the streets and in prison. Research on the city’s street gangs conducted since the turn of the century, however, although relatively sparse, provides some insights into potentially-important shifts in the city’s gang landscape since the dawn of the millennium. The spaces in which gangs have traditionally operated, for example, have been and continue to be transformed, as nearly all of the city’s public housing projects have been demolished and many of the communities in which gangs previously flourished are being gentrified (Hagedorn, 2007; Hagedorn & Rauch, 2007). Moreover, there are some indications that the organizational structures of the drug-selling gangs of the 1990s have been weakened due to police suppression and mass incarceration (Ralph, 2010, 2014). Finally, the importance of racialized identities and the role of music in the lives of gang members have emerged as new areas of possible exploration (Hagedorn, 2006, 2008; Harkness, 2013). An more comprehensive examination of Chicago’s black street gangs and the violence in which their members are involved in the early twenty-first century, however, has not yet been undertaken. It is this important gap in the existing literature that this study aims to fill.
III. METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Strategy of Inquiry

This research study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and perspectives of Chicago gang members on a wide range of topics related to their gang experiences and beyond. A grounded theory methodology was utilized as the study’s strategy of inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory constitutes an inductive approach to research that emphasizes the use of comparisons within the data and theoretical sampling in the pursuit of theory-building. As such, the grounded theory approach rejects positivistic notions of a universal, objective reality that forces research data into an imposed, preexisting theoretical framework. Instead, this strategy of inquiry is rooted in a pragmatic interactionist epistemology that assumes the position that “knowledge is created through [the] action and interaction… of self-reflective beings” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 19).

Grounded theory was a particularly appropriate strategy of inquiry for this study for a number of reasons. Its inductive nature, for example, matched well with the exploratory aims of the study, which was undertaken largely due to the apparent inability of the existing gang literature to adequately explain the contemporary dynamics of gangs and violence in Chicago. This inductive approach, moreover, placed the perspectives and experiences of the study participants squarely in the center of the analysis, which was also consistent with the aims of the study. In addition, grounded theory’s emphasis on theory development—that is, the construction of a “plausible explanatory framework” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 264) for the phenomenon under study—made it well-suited for this inquiry. Indeed, as the analysis proceeded and it became clear that an explanation of the current dynamics within Chicago’s black street gangs necessitated an accounting of the process by which these gangs had shattered and been
reconfigured since the dawn of the millennium (see also the section on Data Analysis below), this emphasis on explanation proved even more important to the analysis process. Finally, as a novice researcher, the grounded theory methodology developed by Corbin and Strauss (2008, 2015) was selected over a number of other possible grounded theory approaches (for example, Charmaz, 2014; Glaser 1978, 1992) due to the greater degree of structure and guidance provided by this method with respect to the data analysis process. This structure was particularly important given the naturalistic nature of this inquiry, in which I, as the researcher, constituted the primary research instrument.

**Participatory Researchers**

As described in the Statement of Positionality in the introductory chapter, I came to this research largely based on my experiences working with African American youth on Chicago’s South Side, many of whom were gang members. In turn, it was those with whom I had built relationships through this work that I engaged in the process of carrying out this research study. This not only applied to study participants (see the section on Participant Recruitment below), but also to the inclusion of participatory researchers, as well. Thus, although this study did not constitute community-based participatory research in the full sense of that research paradigm (for example, see Hacker, 2013; Heron & Reason, 1997), it incorporated some of its elements, including being conducted within various community-based settings, which will be discussed in the Data Collection section below; developing out of reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the study community, discussed in the introductory chapter; and including indigenous members of the study community in various aspects of the research process, which will be discussed here.

More specifically, two young former gang members were trained as participatory researchers for this research study and assisted in the development of the interview guide and the
recruitment of study participants and also provided feedback on the development of the analysis throughout the data analysis process. Thus, their involvement in this research both assisted in its very completion and also increased the trustworthiness of the research findings (see the section on Ensuring Study Rigor below). One of the participatory researchers I had worked with as a mentor and employer in my community work on Chicago’s South Side. The other I had worked with as a colleague in this work. I knew both of these individuals to be extremely knowledgeable about the dynamics of street gangs and violence in Chicago and to be principled and trustworthy people. Thus, I asked them individually if they would be interested in helping me conduct research with gang members for my dissertation study and offered to pay them $10 an hour for their assistance. They gladly agreed to assist with the research but both flatly refused to accept compensation for their efforts, stating that I had provided them with support and mentoring and they considered any assistance they might provide on the research project simply a reciprocation of these dynamics. Nonetheless, the participatory researchers’ involvement in this study not only improved their understanding of the dynamics of street gangs and violence that affect their lives and communities, it also provided them with some insights into and skills pertaining to the process of research. Indeed, participation in this study spurred one of the participatory researchers to pursue an evaluation of a program he was implementing with young African American fathers.

The University of Illinois’s (UIC) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved their involvement in this research study. In accordance with IRB requirements, the participatory researchers completed the human subjects protection training for Social and Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel offered through UIC’s online Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI). In addition, they completed a supplemental, study-specific training that I
developed, which focused on the relevance of the CITI training to the current study, particularly with respect to issues of privacy and confidentiality, coercion and undue influence, and voluntary and informed consent. A thorough understanding of these issues was important to ensuring that the participatory researchers carry out study tasks in a manner consistent with the highest standards of human subjects protections. The study-specific training also described the role of the participatory researchers in the study and included a brief overview of qualitative research methods, a detailed review of IRB-approved procedures and documents, and a role-play activity related to participant recruitment. These trainings were completed prior to the start of participant recruitment.

**Study Sample**

**Study population.** The study population for this research was active gang members in Chicago. More specifically, participant inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) membership in a street gang, (2) involvement in at least four violent incidents over the past two years, (3) willingness and ability to speak candidly, in English, and in some detail about the research topics, (4) male, and (5) age 16–32. The participatory researchers, other study participants, and I identified potential participants. Thus, in accordance with the snowball sampling approach, information regarding inclusion criteria was initially determined through the familiarity of referrers with potential participants and subsequently confirmed by these individuals through self-report prior to their participation in the study.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, widespread disagreement exists among gang scholars—to say nothing of law enforcement officials—when it comes to defining street gangs and establishing the parameters of gang members. For the purposes of this research, street gangs were defined using Hagedorn’s (2008) conception of these collectives as “alienated groups
socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions” (p. 31). The intentional broadness of this definition facilitates comparative analyses of these groups across time, which constitutes a central aim of this study. In addition, this definition avoids the “logically and theoretically indefensible,” yet commonly employed, practice of “including in the definition of gangs… the behavior one wishes to explain” (Short, 1998, p. 14)—in other words, defining gangs as violent, criminal, and/or delinquent groups. For the last half-century, the Black Disciples, Black P. Stones, Gangster Disciples, and Mickey Cobras have been among the most prominent street gangs in Chicago, and it is largely from these groups that the sample for this study was drawn (see section on Research Participants below).

Given gang members’ status as a hidden and hard-to-reach population, however, identification and sampling of this population is often difficult (Hagedorn, 1990). In many Chicago neighborhoods, moreover, local gang identities are often used by youthful residents as proxies for neighborhood identity, thereby creating further ambiguity around issues of gang membership.¹² This research, then, relied on the expertise of confirmed gang members themselves to establish membership status among potential study participants. On one hand, my experiences working with young people on the South Side of Chicago allowed me to observe the often-subtle distinctions that gang members made between themselves and those they considered friendly associates. The participatory researchers who worked on this study, moreover, were both well-known gang members with extensive networks of gang peers and, thus, were able to make such distinctions very easily—a dynamic that extended to study participants themselves, as well. As the criteria used to established gang membership entailed identification as a gang member by other, confirmed members and subsequent self-acknowledgement of membership,

¹² See Chapter 4 for further discussion related to the relative fluidity of gang membership.
such intimate familiarity with the study population was essential to facilitating the accurate identification and sampling of study participants.

As a major part of the study concerned examining the nature of the violence in which gang members are involved, moreover, participants were required to have been involved as a co-disputant in at least four violent events in the two years prior to their interviews. The operational definition of violent event was borrowed from Oliver’s (1994) study of violence among African American men as “interpersonal transaction[s] in which one or more individuals attempts to direct or actually directs physical force toward another person” (p. 5). At least one of these events, however, had to have involved the use of a firearm. More specifically, study participants had to have been involved in an incident within the past two years in which they were shot at or in which they or an acquaintance, in their presence, shot at another person or group of people. Finally, this study focused on males between the ages of 16 and 32, as these demographic markers characterize the vast majority of gang members as well as most victims and perpetrators of homicide in Chicago and throughout the United States (CPD, 2013; FBI, 2016; Hagedorn, 2008; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spergel, 1995).

**Participant recruitment.** Three strategies were used to identify and recruit potential participants for this study. Although these sampling strategies were roughly employed in the order in which they are discussed here, it should be noted that there was also temporal overlap between the use of these various methods. The first strategy entailed inviting potential participants with whom the participatory researchers and I had professional and/or personal relationships to participate in the study. I cultivated these relationships through my work in various community settings on the South Side of Chicago with young people, including many gang members. As relatively young former gang members, moreover, the participatory
researchers still had personal relationships with many active gang members, and one of the participatory researchers had recently started a non-profit organization for young black fathers on Chicago’s South Side, which provided an additional pool of potential participants. Potential participants from each of these various relationships were invited to participate in the study.

These relationships provided ready access to a wide range of gang members, a hard-to-reach population whose members may otherwise be hesitant to participate in research due to, among other potential factors, social alienation and distrust of mainstream institutions and their representatives, such as university researchers. Given these realities, the ability of scholars to conduct research with gang members, particularly outside of institutional settings, is often limited, and those interested in conducting research directly with this population typically must spend considerable time gaining such access (see Hagedorn, 1990). The relationships that the participatory researchers and I had already established with members of this population made such laborious efforts largely unnecessary within communities such as Grand Boulevard, Washington Park, Woodlawn, and Greater Grand Crossing on Chicago’s South Side. Given the difficulty involved in building the relationships necessary to carry out research like the present study, participant recruitment was mostly limited to these and other nearby communities. Despite this limitation, however, the aforementioned communities were, in many ways, ideal for the purposes of this study given their storied gang histories and persistently high rates of violence (City of Chicago, 2016b; Cooley, 2011; Fry, 1973; McPherson, 1970; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Venkatesh, 1997, 2000, 2006; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000).

During the second phase of participant recruitment, a snowball sampling method was employed. Snowball sampling involves utilizing study participants to recruit additional participants within their social networks who meet the study’s inclusion criteria. This sampling
technique is particularly appropriate for the purposes of studies involving gang members and other hard-to-reach, or hidden, populations for a number of reasons. First, members of these populations may be difficult to identify, and sampling frames for such populations do not exist. In addition, members of these populations may be leery of the research process for any number of reasons, including their involvement in sensitive or illegal activities or their status as a marginalized population. Engaging such populations in a research project, then, requires a certain degree of trust that is more readily accomplished through a referral by an individual with whom a potential study participant already shares an established relationship (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Hendricks & Blanken, 1992). The nature of street gangs as networks of individuals who share close personal relationships, then, make snowball sampling particularly relevant for research involving gang members, and this sampling technique has been used extensively in such studies (for example, Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1988; Padilla, 1992).

Finally, theoretical sampling, an integral component of the grounded theory method, was also utilized as a sampling method. The definition and purpose of theoretical sampling can be understood as:

A method of data collection based on concepts/themes derived from data. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to collect data from places, people, and events that will maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties, and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 143)

Thus, as earlier participant interviews were completed and analysis of this interview data simultaneously began (see the sections on Data Collection and Data Analysis below), emergent concepts and themes were identified in the data. As the properties of these concepts and the dimensions of these properties were developed, theoretical sampling was employed in an attempt to discover variations in those properties and dimensions. To name just a few examples of the
ways in which theoretical sampling was employed in this study, a number of study participants were recruited in order to uncover dimensional variations in a number of properties related to the nature of their street gangs, including, among other factors, the size of their membership, the street organization affiliation(s) of their members (see Table I below; discussed at length in Chapters 5 and 6), and the nature of the relationships between older and younger members. In addition, in order to determine whether variations in the nature of Chicago’s street gangs and the violence in which they are involved existed based on neighborhood, I recruited participants from seven different community areas on the city’s South Side. After completing 20 interviews, I determined that I had reached the point of saturation in terms of the development of the properties and dimensions of the major study concepts and themes and with respect to explaining their conceptual relationships to one another (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The chair of the dissertation committee and another member whose area of expertise lies in street gangs, as well, agreed with this assessment, and data collection ended at 20 interviews.

**Research participants.** All 20 of the participants in this research study were African American male gang members from the South Side of Chicago. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 31, with a median age of 21 years. In total, these 20 study participants belonged to 10 distinct gangs. Between one and four members of each of these gangs completed an interview.

All four of the major street organizations whose traditional strongholds are on Chicago’s South Side—the Black Disciples, Black P. Stones, Gangster Disciples, and Mickey Cobras—were represented in the study sample as were participants from the Outlaw and Insane renegade factions of the Gangster Disciples. One participant belonged to a neighborhood-based gang but did not identify with any of these broader, traditional gang identities.\(^{13}\) Table I below displays

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\(^{13}\) See Chapter 6 for a treatment of this type of distinction.
study participants’ ages, communities, and street organization affiliations along with their assigned pseudonyms. The table also groups participants by their gang (see the first column).

**TABLE I**

**STUDY PARTICIPANT AGES, COMMUNITIES, AND STREET ORGANIZATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gang No.</th>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Community Area</th>
<th>Street Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Montrelle</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Grand Boulevard</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Grand Boulevard</td>
<td>Mickey Cobras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Grand Boulevard</td>
<td>Mickey Cobras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Durrell</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Washington Park</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Washington Park</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Washington Park</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Woodlawn</td>
<td>Mickey Cobras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cassius</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Woodlawn</td>
<td>Outlaw Gangster Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Woodlawn</td>
<td>Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rasheed</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Woodlawn</td>
<td>Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marco</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weezy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zeke</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jabari</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>Insane Gangster Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Chatham</td>
<td>Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cortez</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Roseland</td>
<td>Gangster Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Roseland</td>
<td>Gangster Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>New City</td>
<td>Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Research participants in context.** The communities from which study participants were drawn are all located on Chicago’s South Side. Of the 20 participants, 16 hailed from communities in the city’s mid-South Side area (Grand Boulevard, Washington Park, Woodlawn, and Greater Grand Crossing), an additional three participants were from communities on the far South Side (Chatham and Roseland), and one participant was drawn from a community on the near Southwest Side (New City). Participants’ communities are among the most marginalized and distressed in Chicago as evidenced by a wide range of social indicators. Levels of poverty, unemployment, racial segregation, and violence within these communities, for example, are typically twice or even three times the corresponding levels in Chicago as a whole and up to 10 times the national averages (see Table II below). These neighborhoods are also among the city’s most blighted, with many having lost more than half of their housing stock over the last half-century due to public and private disinvestment and neglect, decay, and landlord arson (Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 2014; Wacquant, 2008, 2010). Nearly two-thirds of the schools that remain in operation in these communities perform below the city average, and one in six neighborhood schools performs so poorly that they have been officially declared in need of “intensive support” (Chicago Public Schools, 2015). Participants’ communities also rank among the highest in Chicago with respect to rates of mental health hospitalization (Chicago Department of Public Health, 2012). More generally, more than half of black Chicago-area residents ages 20–24 are unemployed, a figure that approaches 90% among those ages 16–19—the highest unemployment rates for young African Americans among the country’s ten largest metropolitan areas (Ross & Svajlenka, 2016). African American residents of Chicago, moreover, are 10 times more likely to be shot by a police officer than their white counterparts (City of Chicago Independent Police Review Authority, 2015).
TABLE II
SELECTED SOCIAL INDICATORS IN STUDY PARTICIPANT COMMUNITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Area</th>
<th>Household Poverty Rate (%)</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate (%)</th>
<th>Percent African American</th>
<th>Homicide Rate(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grand Boulevard</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Park</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodlawn</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Grand Crossing</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatham</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roseland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New City</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>—(^b)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Area Mean</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Chicago</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data for household poverty and unemployment rates was obtained from City of Chicago (2011). Data on racial demographics can be found in Yonek and Hasnain-Wynia (2011). Community area homicide rates were calculated using homicide and community-specific census data from City of Chicago (2016a, 2016b). Homicide data for the city of Chicago was obtained from FBI (2016). \(a\) All homicide rates are per 100,000 people. Figures listed represent average annual homicide rates for the years 2006–2015, except the figure for the city of Chicago, which does not include data for 2015. \(b\) Racial demographic data for New City is excluded from the analysis presented here. This community serves as a point of convergence for three highly-segregated areas of Chicago’s South Side: one Latino, one black, and one white. As the community remains highly segregated despite the substantial presence of three racial/ethnic groups, to include the percentage of African American residents (32%) in the table would have implied a level of integration that does not exist.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary means of data collection, which allowed for the development of an “understanding [of] the lived experience of [study participants] and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Each participant completed one interview. Interviews were conducted in a location deemed to be
comfortable by the participant and I and which was generally conducive to the interview process with regard to privacy, background noise, and other potential distractions. Thus, some interviews with participants with whom I already shared a personal relationship were completed in my apartment. I also conducted a handful of interviews in my car as well as one interview in a participant’s apartment. The majority of interviews, however, were conducted in a private office at a non-profit organization that works with young black men on Chicago’s South Side. This setting, then, conveyed a degree of both professionalism and casualness that seemed well suited for carrying out interviews. The length of participant interviews fluctuated between approximately 50 minutes and two-and-a-half hours, with the average interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded using an encrypted portable digital recording device.

In addition, two forms with demographic information relevant to the study were completed and collected for each participant after completion of their respective interviews. One of these forms, the Participant Interview Form, included items related to participant age, the street organization with which they identified, and the community from which they hailed. Data from this form was linked to specific participants. The second form, the Anonymous Participant Interview Form, included items related to level of education, employment status, and contact with the criminal justice system. Data from this form was aggregated and not linked to specific participants. I, alone, obtained informed consent from study participants and completed all participant interviews. While, in some ways, it would have been preferable to include the participatory researchers in data collection activities, they were excluded from these activities due to the sensitive nature of the interview questions as well as to avoid any potential issues that may have arisen between them and study participants due to their recent histories as former gang
members. Participants were compensated $20 for their time and effort following their interviews.

**Data Handling and Preparation**

Participant interviews were recorded on an encrypted portable digital recording device, and the interview audio files were uploaded and saved onto a personal computer in my home office to which only I had access. This computer was password protected and encrypted using PGP Desktop, the encryption software provided by University of Illinois at Chicago for the protection of sensitive electronic data. Each original audio recording was deleted from the digital recorder after the file had been successfully saved to the computer. Each interview was then transcribed verbatim in a Microsoft Word document as soon as possible following its completion, in preparation for data analysis. All transcriptions were completed either by myself or a transcription assistant and fellow social worker who assisted me in this process. I later verified those transcripts completed by the transcription assistant to ensure their accuracy.

Although all interviews were initially transcribed verbatim, once an interview had been fully transcribed and the accuracy of the transcript had been checked against the audio recording, any potentially identifiable information was redacted from the transcript and replaced with fictionalized material (for more details on this process, see the section on Human Subjects Protection below). These transcripts were saved on the password-protected and encrypted computer in the same manner as the audio files. De-identified interview transcripts were then uploaded into ATLAS.ti 7, a qualitative data analysis program, in preparation for analysis. All hard copies of study forms were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
Data Analysis

Study data were analyzed inductively using a grounded theory process largely based on the methodology outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008; see also Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used ATLAS.ti 7 throughout the analysis process to assist in the organization of the analysis. Per grounded theory method, the data analysis process began immediately upon completion of the first interview and continued throughout the data collection period and beyond. The simultaneous collection and analysis of study data facilitated the timely discovery of important concepts and themes within the data. This allowed me to make theoretically driven modifications to the interview guide, including the inclusion of key concepts as prompts and the reordering and amendment of interview questions. For example, the salience of the generational disconnect between younger and older gang members became apparent in my analysis of approximately the first half-dozen interviews. I was, thus, able to incorporate questions and probes related to this phenomenon in subsequent interviews, and this theme became a central part of the overall study analysis. The concurrent collection and analysis of study data also facilitated my ability to employ theoretical sampling as a means of deepening the analysis (described in the section on Participant Recruitment above).

Following completion of an interview transcript, I began the data analysis process first by reading through the transcript in its entirety in an attempt to immerse myself in the worldview of the participant. I then engaged in the open coding, the initial form of coding within the grounded theory approach outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008, 2015). This process involved selecting passages within the data, starting with the beginning of the transcript, and inductively interpreting their contents. More specifically, sections of these passages were coded, that is, ascribed a conceptual label based on my interpretation of their meaning. I employed a number of
analytic tools, or strategies, in this process, including asking sensitizing questions of the data, making constant comparisons, and interrogating the potential meanings of various words used by participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using these techniques helped me to consider a range of possible interpretations of the data and identify the interpretation that seemed to best explain what the participant was communicating. I then composed memos explaining the codes that I had identified as well as the ways in which they appeared to relate to one another conceptually. In particular, in some cases, identified codes represented properties and dimensions of a broader concept within the same interview passage. Thus, memos were used to differentiate between and explain the conceptual ordering of concepts, properties, and dimensions. All codes and memos were composed on ATLAS.ti 7, which also attached them to the applicable passages from the interview transcripts.

As the analysis progressed and I coded additional participant interviews, I was increasingly able to engage in axial coding, or “the act of relating concepts/categories to each other” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 198). This process involved identifying patterns in the data and exploring similarities and differences in these patterns across interviews. By using the constant comparative technique with respect to larger concepts and themes, I was able to draw together seemingly disparate concepts (as well as their properties and dimensions) under broader, abstracted themes. An important part of the axial coding process also involved analyzing the study data for context and process. Together, these analytic strategies helped explain more fully the concepts, themes, and categories emerging from the data and helped to situate participants’ experiences and decisions within broader social conditions and processes. For example, these types of contextual and process-related insights were integral to understanding participants’ decisions to join their respective street gangs as well as the current nature of these gangs, which
are radically different than their 1990s predecessors. Memos composed during this latter stage in the analysis were more integrative in nature, linking higher-order themes and categories together. Finally, these categories were conceptually integrated around a core category so as to “construct a plausible explanatory framework” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 264) for the phenomenon under investigation. In this research, the core category that emerged from the analysis process was resistance, the nature of which as it pertains to street gangs will be discussed at length in the following findings chapters.

It should be noted that the process of data analysis, like the grounded theory approach more generally, was not linear, but was necessarily recursive (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I returned many times to reread and reanalyze interview transcripts, challenging my initial interpretations and looking for new insights. Indeed, the emergent, inductive, and recursive nature of the analysis process led me to develop two findings chapters that I had no initial intentions of writing and whose themes I had no real intentions of exploring—the first and second findings chapters that follow, Street Gangs as Resistance and Populist Gang Resistance and the Shattering of Chicago’s Black Street Organizations. More specifically, as the analysis developed, it became apparent that an explanation of the dynamics among Chicago’s contemporary African American street gangs and a discussion of the ways in which these dynamics differed from those that characterized the city’s gangs during the 1990s would be woefully inadequate without an accounting of the process by which these dynamics had transformed. In addition, the essential role that resistance played in this process of gang transformation was also evident in the reasons participants gave for joining these gangs in the first place and in the functions and meanings of these groups in their lives. Thus, in true inductive fashion, the data and the emergent themes guided the analysis. Finally, I also met with
the participatory researchers throughout the analysis process in order to share my interpretations of the study data. Their feedback also caused me at times to revisit my previous interpretations and return to the data in search of a more accurate reading.

**Ensuring Study Rigor**

A number of factors and strategies served to strengthen the rigor of the data analysis process and, thus, the trustworthiness of the research findings, including: my use of memos and field notes, my theoretical sensitivity to the research area, and the inclusion of participatory researchers indigenous to the study community in the research process. As described above, I composed memos throughout the data analysis process documenting my analytic reflections on the research data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015). In addition, following the completion of each participant interview and my meetings with the participatory researchers, I composed field notes documenting my “personal, affective, and cognitive reactions to the day’s research activities” (Anastas, 2004, p. 60; see also Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Together, these field notes and memos created an “audit trail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 283) detailing the development of the data analysis process.

The use of field notes was also helpful for documenting and addressing issues related to reflexivity in the research process (Finlay, 2002). For example, going into the study, I expected that study participants with whom I had not already established a personal relationship—that is, those participants referred by other participants or the participatory researchers—might be hesitant to share with me detailed information regarding their involvement in violent events. Participants with whom I was already familiar, on the other hand, would be more comfortable sharing such information. After perhaps a half-dozen interviews, however, the opposite dynamic appeared to have emerged. Thus, following an interview with a participant with whom I shared a
prior relationship, I asked him about his hesitance to share information pertaining to his involvement in violence with me. He responded that, although he knew that I knew he was a member of a street gang and involved in serious violence, he was hesitant to share information with me that he believed might cause me to look at him differently. I, then, was able to use this insight in tailoring my approach to subsequent interviews with participants with whom I was familiar, emphasizing that I was not particularly interested in the types of details that they might be hesitant to share with me, but, rather, in more impersonal information related to these events. This strategy seemed to put these participants at greater ease, helping to facilitate the completion of their interviews in a manner that was less stressful for them.

Another factor that helped strengthen the rigor of the analysis and the trustworthiness of the study findings was the theoretical sensitivity to the issues explored in this study with which I approached this research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically, I have had various direct experiences with violence and have close relationships, both personal and professional, with gang members and others who have both committed and been victimized by serious violence. Being close to people who have been on both sides of violent incidents has enabled me to empathize with not only victims of violence but with those who have committed acts of violence, as well. Indeed, the lines of distinction between these two groups are often blurred, as many individuals ultimately fulfill both roles (Berg, Stewart, Schreck, & Simon, 2012; Papachristos et al., 2014; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1990). Moreover, my familiarity with the study population provides me with knowledge of the colloquial language and expressions of members of street gangs, which helped to facilitate a more accurate analysis and presentation of the data. Indeed, on a more fundamental level, it is my work with young people on Chicago’s South Side, including many gang members, that made this research study possible in the first place.
The inclusion of participatory researchers indigenous to the study community—that is, former gang members—also increased the rigor of the research process and the trustworthiness of the study findings in a number of ways. On one hand, the participatory researchers were able to identify potential study participants and verify that these individuals met the study criteria, particularly with respect to their status as active gang members. In addition, my consultations with the participatory researchers on the development of the study analysis throughout the data analysis process provided a number of crucial benefits. Most importantly, their feedback served as a “member check” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 214; see also Creswell, 2013) of sorts, as the participatory researchers were former gang members intimately familiar with many of the themes that emerged from the participant interviews. This dialectic process, moreover, helped to guard against the influence of any potential biases on my part as the major interpreter of the research data.

**Human Subjects Protections**

Participation in this study involved a number of potential risks, and various safeguards were employed to ensure the protection of human subjects. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) reviewed these potential risks and protections and approved this study. The three greatest potential risks associated with participation in this study were: coercion and undue influence, breach of confidentiality, and emotional or psychological discomfort. A number of steps were taken to reduce the potential of each of these risks.

The possibility for coercion or undue influence existed given the study’s use of snowball sampling and the relatively marginal social position of the study population. This potential risk was minimized using a variety of strategies. As they were involved in the participant recruitment
process, the participatory researchers completed human subjects protection training for Social and Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel through UIC’s online Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI). In addition, I provided supplemental instruction on human subjects protection as part of a study-specific participatory researcher training, focusing on the relevance of the CITI training to the proposed study, particularly with respect to issues of privacy and confidentiality, coercion and undue influence, and voluntary and informed consent.

Nonetheless, I, alone, obtained informed consent from each study participant before each interview. During the informed consent process, I discussed the three potential risks delineated above, as well as the steps taken to mitigate these potential risks. This information was also formally detailed in the informed consent document (see Subject Information Sheet). In discussing informed consent with prospective participants, I emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and the fact that no information about whether or not they chose to participate in the study would be shared with anyone, even those who may have referred them. Potential participants were also informed that they were not obligated to answer any interview questions with which they were uncomfortable and that they may end the interview at any time and would face no penalty for doing so. This information was also highlighted during participant recruitment processes, and the voluntary nature of study participation was emphasized in all recruitment materials. Finally, questions were incorporated into the informed consent process to ensure that participants understood the nature of voluntary and informed consent and were consenting to participate in the study according to those criteria.

Breach of confidentiality posed a potential risk, as participant eligibility for this study was predicated on gang membership and involvement in violence. Thus, a number of steps were taken to protect participant confidentiality. Although confidentiality could not be guaranteed
during the initial identification and recruitment of potential study participants due to the sampling methods employed in this study, as noted above, no information about whether or not a potential participant chose to participate in the study was shared with anyone. The IRB approved a waiver of documentation of consent, and no identifying information was collected from participants. For participants under the age of 18—of which there was one—the IRB approved a Waiver of Parental Consent, as parental consent would not have served to protect study participants given that participation in the research was predicated on gang membership and involvement in violence. Instead, a youth advocate was made available to potential participants under the age of 18 to discuss with them the possibility of participating in the research, if they chose to seek such counsel. Each participant was also provided with a consent form that I signed and dated and that contained contact information for myself, the chair of the dissertation committee, Mark Mattaini, and the UIC IRB.

Some information that potentially could have been used to identify participants, however, including participants’ voices, was inevitably captured during the course of participant interviews. Thus, after the audio file for each interview was transferred onto my computer, it was permanently deleted from the portable digital recording device. Both the recording device and my computer were encrypted using Advanced Encryption Standard with a key length of 256 bits. Further, after an interview had been transcribed verbatim and the accuracy of the transcript had been checked against the audio recording, any potentially-identifiable information was redacted from the transcript and replaced with fictionalized material, including, for example, the names of people, neighborhood-specific gangs (names of broader street organizations were retained), locations, and schools; specific information about family members; and details related to violent events or criminal convictions. This process was repeated for each individual
transcript as it was completed. The audio files of the interviews were permanently deleted from my computer upon completion of data collection.

The third potential risk involved the possibility that participants might experience emotional or psychological discomfort in the process of recalling and describing life experiences, some of which involved violence and may have been traumatic in nature. To mitigate this potential risk, participants’ ability to take a break from the interview, skip interview questions, or end the interview at any time was emphasized during the recruitment and consent processes. Additionally, in the event that a study participant exhibited notable signs of emotional or psychological discomfort during the course of their interview, I reiterated these options and asked the participant if he would like to take a break before continuing the interview. I am a trained social work practitioner who has received specialized training in working with children and families that helped to facilitate the detection of potential emotional or psychological discomfort or distress in study participants. Although participants displayed a wide range of emotions during their interviews, including sadness and grief, at no point did I believe that such intervention was necessary and at no time during any interview did a participant ask to take a break from or end the interview. Indeed, when I asked participants at the end of their interviews what they thought of the interview experience, a number of them stated that they found it to be therapeutic, affording them a rare opportunity to express themselves in ways and about topics they were not typically able to talk about with anyone in the routine course of their lives. Nonetheless, as a precautionary measure, all participants were provided with a list of free mental health service providers in the city of Chicago in the event that they wished to seek counseling at any time following their respective interviews (see Mental Health Service Providers).
IV. FINDINGS: STREET GANGS AS RESISTANCE

The first questions on the interview guide for this study asked participants to describe their early life experiences as well as their experiences related to joining their respective street gangs. On a practical level pertaining to the research process, this line of questioning served to ease participants into their interviews by encouraging them to provide biographical background information that they deemed relevant to the interview and that they felt comfortable sharing. This was especially important given the sensitive nature of much of the later themes covered in these interviews, particularly when interviewing participants with whom I did not have an established personal relationship. Substantively, this data provided an invaluable framework for understanding not only participants’ early life experiences and the essential roles that street gangs played in providing them with recourse in the face of those experiences, but also their later experiences within these gangs and their eventual efforts to transform them. In short, these data proved essential in fashioning the theory of street gangs as vehicles of resistance presented over the course of the following findings chapters.

Study participants characterized the context within which they grew up as being fundamentally shaped by conditions of material marginality, physical insecurity, and psychological domination. Participants described these oppressive early life experiences primarily within the context of the various social institutions within which they were embedded, particularly their neighborhoods, families, schools, and what they experienced as a police state.

14 These themes will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters.
15 Participants’ experiences as presented in this chapter share many similarities with various theories of oppression and violence that locate the sources of these conditions within the cultural, structural, and institutional arrangements and practices of society (for example, Bourdieu, 2000; Bourgois, 2009; Farmer, 2003, 2004; Galtung, 1969; Scheper-Hughes, 1992, 1996; Wacquant, 1997, 2010, 2014; I. Young, 2011). My primary goal here, however, was not the development of a new typology for understanding and classifying oppressive experiences, but, rather, the development of a theory of street gangs grounded in an inductive analysis of the research data. A specific discussion of participants’ experiences as they relate to general theories of oppression, therefore, is beyond the scope of this discussion.
within their communities. Indeed, not only did marginalization, insecurity, and domination characterize participants’ experiences of these various institutional settings, but these dynamics have fundamentally shaped these institutions, as well, both in relation to their positions within the wider society and with respect to the ways in which these dynamics are reproduced or arise within these settings. It was under these conditions that street gangs provided participants with a variety of indispensable resources and opportunities that facilitated and promoted resistance of these conditions and their effects—that is, their “refusal to accept or comply with” the oppressive conditions that shaped their lives and to “not be affected by [them]… adversely” (Resistance, 2016). Participants’ view of gangs as a form of resistance emerged in their explanations of their rationales for joining their respective gangs and in their descriptions of the functions and meanings that these collectives have played in their lives. This chapter, then, explores participants’ early life experiences and the critical role of street gangs in their efforts to resist passively accepting these desperate and seemingly hopeless circumstances.

Before diving into the analysis, however, three brief notes are in order. The first pertains to usage of the terms gang and street gang. Very few participants referred to the collectives to which they belonged using these terms at any point in their respective interviews. Rather, participants employed a wide range of alternate expressions, most of which emphasized geographic allegiances (e.g., “the ’hood” or “the block”) or group camaraderie (e.g., “my friends” or “the guys”), seemingly deemphasizing the centrality of deviance and criminality, qualities typically associated with use of the term gang. Such framings did not represent attempts by participants to deny their involvement in violent and illicit activities, as participants openly discussed these topics throughout their interviews. Nonetheless, this language is emblematic of the ways that participants themselves conceive of these groups and their
membership therein, in particular, their rejection of a self-descriptor widely associated with—or even defined by—deviance and criminality (see Brotherton, 2015; Conquergood, 1996; Hagedorn & Chesney-Lind, 2014). For the sake of consistency and clarity, however, I use the terms street gang and gang (interchangeably) in describing these groups throughout my analysis in this chapter. Conversely, the language that participants themselves used to describe these groups are evident in several of the quotes included in the sections below.

The second note pertains to the processes by which participants joined their respective gangs. Participants generally described these processes as extensions of early childhoods spent in the streets and as a seemingly natural part of neighborhood life: the young men in the neighborhood whom they looked up to—often including their own family members—were members of the local gang, and participants and their friends were gradually integrated into these groups as they entered adolescence. Indeed, for most participants, joining the local gang simply entailed a mutual—and sometimes implicit—acknowledgement between the participant and the members of the gang that the participant was now considered a member. No participant described having to endure a beating or commit an act of violence as part of their initiation, a point of emphasis for a number of participants. Furthermore, participants stated unequivocally that they were not coerced into joining by established gang members. Rather, these gangs cultivated an atmosphere of acceptance within which participants were encouraged, as their

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16 Chapter 6 will employ two alternative terms for these collectives—street organizations and cliques—in order to highlight the radical changes that these groups have undergone since the turn of the century.

17 Although a full discussion of these processes is beyond the scope of, and relatively immaterial to, the findings presented in this chapter, the information provided here is designed to provide some essential clarification about these processes in order to facilitate a more accurate reading of the subsequent findings, particularly by dispelling the notion that gangs “are constantly luring youth into their deviant midst and that the most desperate and/or ruthless of groups resort to almost ‘coercive ganging’” (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004, p. 200).

18 Participants were not, however, asked this question explicitly. Additionally, many participants had, by that point, been involved in a great deal of violence, often related to defending their neighborhood friends and even fighting members of gangs from rival neighborhoods.
friends and neighbors, to “come home”—that is, to internalize and declare their membership in the collective.

The third note is that, despite the very real struggles that participants had experienced and that will largely be the focus of this chapter, participants’ lives cannot simply be reduced to perpetual suffering and tragedy. Indeed, a number of participants made this a point of emphasis in their interviews, referencing, among other experiences, familial love, childhood fun, academic successes, and their parents’ valiant attempts to provide for and shelter them. In short, it is important to bear in mind that the study participants are actual human beings with a variety of life experiences and who experience the full gamut of human emotions. That being said, as will become evident in the analysis presented throughout this chapter, participants have generally had to contend with difficult circumstances throughout their lives, and these experiences ultimately brought each of them to the streets.

**Material Marginality and Resistance**

Participants overwhelmingly described growing up in families that were low-income, if not downright impoverished. Many reported that their mothers worked long hours and multiple jobs in the low-wage labor market in order to sustain their households and make ends meet. Additionally, a number of participants talked about the integral roles that their extended families played in helping to raise them within such contexts of hardship (see also Gleeson et al., 2009; Stack, 1975). Despite these efforts, however, participants reported that their families often lacked the resources to ensure that all of their basic material needs were consistently met. Indeed, many participants described living without heat or electricity for periods of time as children, being evicted from their homes, going hungry, and even being homeless, among a range of other experiences related to growing up in abject poverty.
The poverty that generally characterized participants’ family lives as children, however, cannot be understood outside the context of the marginalized and destitute communities in which their families were embedded. More specifically, in addition to high levels of poverty, participants described growing up in communities characterized by entrenched segregation, geographic isolation, municipal neglect, large tracts of vacant lots and boarded-up buildings, and substandard housing (see also the section on Research Participants in Context in the previous chapter). The following quote from Lamont effectively illustrates many of participants’ early life experiences of material marginality, including acute familial poverty, maternal low-wage work, residential instability, community dilapidation, and the isolation of participants’ neighborhoods from the wider life of the city:

We grew up poor. My mama was on public assistance and everything, you know, government stuff all her life. She had six kids by the time she was 23, right? So a woman with six kids at the age of 23 trying to provide for six kids and she’s a kid was shitty…. So any clothes that other people couldn’t fit, we would wear. Some days I’d go to school dirty. If I did, my best friend mom would look out for me. And, you know, it was only because my mom would wake up and go to work at six in the morning. My big brother goin’ to high school, my sister gotta get us dressed, she ain’t iron our clothes, we put on the clothes [from] the day before…. [I’m just] thinkin’ about my mom and how many times we been put out—the sheriff done came and set us out ’cause she didn’t have all the rent money, or whatever that it is, and how wrong it was, you know?…

[So I] grew up in several places. When I was in second and third grade, we lived at 4721 South Princeton. I don’t know the name of that community, but very torn down community, very impoverished community. But then, as I got—then we moved to Riverdale. Riverdale was shitty—same way. And then we moved to Woodlawn, and Woodlawn was shitty…. roaches everywhere, mices everywhere…. I had a real fucked up childhood….

I mean… what people don’t realize is, I didn’t go downtown to Navy Pier—my first time at Navy Pier, I was 18 years old. I didn’t really learn how to get back and forth from downtown ’til I was, like, 23, 24. And it was because I had a girlfriend who worked downtown who I drove to work, so it made me learn these things. But the average kid [in the ’hood] can’t tell you how to get downtown! They can say, “Go this way, go that way.” But ask somebody what bus to get downtown. Ask ’em what street to go to. [They can’t tell you].
Additionally, participants described severe deficiencies of resources within their communities, particularly a dearth of safe recreational spaces and community programming. Moreover, they noted that the few resources that existed in their neighborhoods were often inaccessible to many community residents due to prohibitive costs and other exclusionary practices. Similarly, participants described a virtual lack of employment opportunities in their communities and, as young black men from the ghetto, viewed their chances of obtaining and maintaining employment within the wider metropolitan job market as unlikely. This pessimism was ultimately validated by their experiences as adolescents and young men. Indeed, despite their uniform expression of an intense desire for conventional employment, of the 20 men interviewed for this study, only five were employed at the time of their respective interviews. Furthermore, all but one of these participants were precariously employed, as two were working temporary jobs through a staffing agency and two others were employed at fast food restaurants. In the quote below, Harold effectively summarizes participants’ experiences and perspectives regarding conventional employment, incisively utilizing the development evident in the gentrifying neighborhood in which his interview was conducted as a counterpoint to the prevailing conditions in his own decaying and neglected neighborhood. In so doing, he connects the lack of employment opportunities in his community and the seemingly insurmountable odds of finding work as a young black man with the retreat of the market and the state from urban African American communities and trenchant systemic racism:

Where all these abandoneds and stuff, you could just—it’s properties out here that’s just—like, see what they doin’ across the street [pointing out the window at a large construction site]? In my ’hood, it’s a whole lot of open spots you could just build some

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19 I make reference here to the ghetto as an institutionalized form of racial segregation created, fortified, and reproduced through a broad range of state-sponsored and neighborhood-based strategies (Wacquant, 2007). Chicago’s African American ghetto has been a permanent, if evolving, fixture in the city’s landscape since the early twentieth century (see Drake & Cayton, 1993; Hirsch, 1998; Philpott, 1978; Seligman, 2005; Spear, 1967; Wacquant, 2008; Wilson, 1987, 1996).
stuff and just hire—have people workin’ in there, you know what I’m sayin’?… [But] the areas we in, you know, it—’cause it’s [an] African American neighborhood, you know? The neighborhood known for, like, gangbangers or something like that, so I’m thinkin’, like, they probably won’t even come [that] way. They won’t be too quick to fix stuff up around [there]. So it’s like, they gon’ do it in a better place, like, Hyde Park area or—you know? Mm-mm [I don’t know]. See, it used to be a liquor store [again referencing the construction site outside]. I seen that they just closed that down…. They just—I don’t know. They’ll do that, though, they’ll tear down liquor stores and build stuff like that. But they ain’t gon’ have no blacks, you know what I’m sayin’?…

I don’t know, man. People be discriminatin’, I guess. I don’t know. ’Cause I don’t smoke at all—my piss clean. It’s still hard, though, you know, it still be—I think they look at my background, but I ain’t even got no background…. It’s still hard to get a job, though…. When they see me—and I’ll be presentable—I’ll have a haircut, you know? Dressed nice, you know? They still—I don’t know. It’s just hard. Even when I fill out applications, you never get no call back or—man….

I know I seen Obama [the] other night, he said something about they raisin’ the—I mean, they tryin’ to get some jobs. But he always—they always doin’ that, they always sayin’ that. But I don’t [pausing]… I don’t know. But I know I don’t never see people get hired, though. People go to college and everything and it still be hard, you know? I don’t be knowin’. Like [pausing]… I don’t be knowin’.

Thus, it is within this context of material marginality, namely, acute familial poverty, severely marginalized and under-resourced neighborhoods, and exclusion from the conventional labor market, that street gangs offered participants a vital and viable means of resistance. More specifically, these gangs provided vital economic opportunities and material support that were generally unavailable to study participants otherwise. Most prominently, gangs in participants’ neighborhood espoused a brand of collective outlaw capitalism rooted in the underground economy, particularly local drug distribution, that held tremendous appeal to study participants. In short, in order to sell drugs in these neighborhoods, one had to be a member of the local gang, as street gangs have maintained control of neighborhood drug markets throughout Chicago for decades (see also Hagedorn, 2006, 2008, 2015; Padilla, 1992; Ralph, 2014; Venkatesh, 1997,

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20 A racially-mixed, middle- and upper-class community on the city’s South Side, Hyde Park’s influential stakeholders, including the University of Chicago, have long been enmeshed in efforts to gentrify adjacent black ghetto neighborhoods (see Fish, 1973; Hirsch, 1998; Patillo, 2007).
2000, 2006; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). Moreover, whereas conventional employment generally proved out of reach for study participants, opportunities to earn income in the underground economy as members of the neighborhood gang were more readily—though, as discussed in the following chapters, not always—available. This dynamic, combined with occasional acts of charity and kindness to neighborhood youth and other neighborhood residents, contributed to the perception among participants, and perhaps other community members, of local gang members as proverbial Robin Hoods. In the quote below, for example, Carlos describes both the material stature of the older gang members in his neighborhood during his childhood as well as their accessibility to neighborhood youngsters like himself looking for access to the economic opportunities afforded to those “plugged in” with the local street gang:

What made me wanna fuck around with it? Shit, like I say, shit, them examples that’s set upon you—that’s in front of you, shit…. You eight, nine years old, man, you comin’ outside, you stay in the hood, G.21 Nigga, the corner store across the street, you feel me, and the corner store right now, it’s crackin’. You got everybody out there—niggas in new whips, TVs in the whips, jewelry, Mikes,22 everything—whatever you want at that time, they got that shit and you ain’t got it, you feel me? But them the niggas you can go walk up on them and ask them: “How the fuck you get that?” And they’ll pull you to the side and be like, wop-the-bam, “This what you gotta do,” you feel me?…

I mean, mu’fuckas shoot dice, work a pack [sell drugs], go steal cars, it’s all type of shit goin’ on out here, shit. Man, mu’fucka don’t even know, shit. No dry-snitchin’, you know what I’m sayin’, but it’s—nigga, you can go whack a mu’fucka for a couple of thousand, you know what I’m sayin’? It’s some mu’fuckas out here that you can go do some shit [for] and go get put up real quick, you feel me? A lot of that shit be like that. A lot of young niggas, G, that’s why they so adapted to the street.…

It was shit mama couldn’t provide for me I had to go get, you feel me?…. You know how it go, shit: if you want something, go get it…. Then, when you cuffin’ a lil nigga or something, G—a lot of niggas don’t even know what love is out here, you feel me? So when you cuff a nigga and show him how to get some money and show him a better lifestyle and shit instead of talkin’ about it, then, really, you know what I’m sayin’, ain’t no stoppin’ you, you feel me?

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21 An abbreviation for gangster, many Chicago youth use this term in everyday speech, similar to the informal use of words such as man, dude, or bro.

22 A reference to Michael Jordan’s fashionable signature sneaker, of which there are myriad models and color combinations.
As alluded to in the quote above, the economic appeal of gang involvement was particularly salient for participants as they entered adolescence, a time during which their appetites for material goods, particularly popular brand-name clothing and footwear, was on the rise. Contributing to, if not fundamentally driving, this dynamic was the intensifying standard of conspicuous consumption that participants reported among their peers (see also Anderson, 1999; Chin, 2001; Pattillo, 2013; Ralph, 2010). Conversely, many participants described their transitions into adolescence as being accompanied by decreasing financial support from their families, who often had to dedicate what few resources they had at their disposal toward supporting participants’ younger siblings. While participants would have jumped at the opportunity to work a part-time job in order to purchase fashionable shoes and apparel—a reasonable desire, if not a customary rite of passage, for American adolescents—such employment opportunities were all but nonexistent. In other words, just as participants reached the age at which the standard of designer clothing and shoes was ramping up among their peers, their ability to meet those standards was diminishing. Harold’s description of his experience joining his neighborhood gang, for example, effectively illustrates the convergence of familial poverty, adolescent social pressures, pervasive community unemployment, and the economic opportunities available to gang members that make street gangs a vital source of resistance to material marginality within many low-income communities:

[There] wasn’t no jobs, so I start gangbangin’, you know?… I wasn’t a fly guy. You know, at South Shore [High School] it’s no uniforms, so you had to be fly. I came in there regular ’cause my mama ain’t really have no money. That’s why I really started selling drugs, you know what I’m sayin’, tryin’ to fit in with people, you know?…

23 It is not entirely clear whether the decline in familial financial support that participants reported was, in fact, related to actual reductions in such assistance or whether participants simply perceived this to be the case as their tastes became more expensive as they entered adolescence.
I moved over there, I start hangin’ with the guys a lot, seein’ what they do. I’m [thinking]: 
*Oh, yeah, I gotta get some money, man.* People keep walkin’ up to me like, “You got some green? You got some weed?” At first I was like, “Naw, I ain’t got none.” But then I got that: “What? Oh, yeah, I got some.” It’s an easy way to make money.…

[If there were jobs available, there would be] less people on the street, people would be at work more. You know, they’d be doin’ something positive for money, now, you know?… People wouldn’t even be thinkin’ about no guns or no shootin’ somebody. You’d be at work, makin’ money. Your mind would be thinkin’ like, *Oh, I gotta go to work tomorrow, so I ain’t tryin’ to lose that, go to jail or do something stupid.* Then they’d be thinkin’ like, *Yeah, I gotta go to work, I got a job now. Make some money.…*

[My friends and I are] always talkin’ about it, like, “Man, we need some jobs, man.” Like, you could always hustle, you know, but that guaranteed check [is better].

Yet, while the economic opportunities offered by their neighborhood gangs appealed to some participants primarily as a means of accessing adolescent status symbols that their families were unable to afford, for others the desire to generate income was related to fulfilling more fundamental needs. As described above, many participants experienced periods during their childhood and adolescence in which they lacked basic necessities, such as adequate food, working household utilities, and stable housing. Thus, a number of participants discussed generating money from the streets in order to alleviate the financial pressures facing their families, which were struggling to make ends meet. Roosevelt, for example, explained turning to the underground economy as a young man growing up in desperate circumstances with few obvious avenues for economic survival:

Prior to growin’ up, my mom and dad was—half my life, they was in jail. So I was mostly livin’ with my auntie and my uncle, [who] raised me the majority of my life.… You know, my auntie and my uncle, they didn’t have much money to take care of us, they just had money just to feed us, really. They really couldn’t do much more for us.…

[So] to make ends meet, you gotta do what you gotta do to eat, you know? ’Cause it was hard findin’ jobs, ’cause wasn’t nobody really hirin’ you, you know, comin’ up a black male in Chicago, it was hard to get a job—real hard to get a job.… [So,] basically, I was in the streets takin’ care of myself, you know, takin’ care of my youngest brothers and sisters that’s under me. And comin’ up, I had to do what I had to do to survive, as far as sellin’ drugs.… Most of us didn’t have no choice, ’cause that’s the only way we was makin’ our money, anyway, so we had to keep goin’…. That’s the only way you was
gonna eat. So that’s the only way you was gonna make your money. Without that, you ain’t have nothing.

In addition to the economic opportunities available to participants as members of their respective gangs, such as selling drugs, participants also described various forms of mutual caretaking between members of these collectives. A number of participants, for example, described older members giving them money when they were younger. Others talked about sharing food, cigarettes, and marijuana, and pooling their money together in order to procure these items. Moreover, a number of participants described living with fellow gang members for various periods of time or even having mentors within the gang help them to establish their own places to live. Again, many participants’ family backgrounds were fraught with instability and material scarcity. These caretaking strategies, then, offered a crucial layer of material support for participants whose basic necessities often otherwise went unmet. In the quote below, for example, Rasheed recalled his friend and fellow gang member ensuring that his daily needs were met and even providing him with a place to live and earn money during a period of particular instability in his life:

This my—this damn-near, like, my backbone, though, know what I’m sayin’? If I ain’t got no money, bro makin’ sure I eat, he gon’ make sure I get high, he gon’ make sure I got squares and shit like that. Know what I’m sayin’? This my mans…. He was a grade older than me—he only a year or two older than me…. [but] at the same time, it’s like, he was in the shit way before me, you feel me?…

It’s numerous days, numerous nights—know what I’m sayin’, ’cause I stay gettin’ kicked out the crib—so, shit, them hallways that I used to spend the night in for fun, it’s times where I’m kicked out, that’s my domain at night, know what I’m sayin’?… So bro, [who was living out of town,] like, “Man, I just need somebody out here. Out of everybody, shit, I can’t see nobody else out here with me other than you. Come out here with me, bro.”… Bro done brought me out of town with him, we trappin’ [selling drugs] together and all that, gettin’ money together, all that. I’m talkin’ ’bout, brought me out of town with nothin’, know what I’m sayin’?…

[He] just got locked up for some shit he ain’t even do, man. Just took 10, know what I’m sayin’, copped out for 10 [took a 10-year plea bargain] because they got to talkin’ crazy
numbers. He ain’t even do the shit, though. Took the 10, though. He gotta do seven off that shit [before being eligible for release].

In providing them with opportunities to generate income in the underground economy and participate in various forms of mutual caretaking, then, street gangs provided participants with an attractive means of resisting the conditions of poverty and economic exclusion facing their families and communities. Gang membership, in other words, offered many participants a modicum of economic stability as well as empowerment, in the sense that it functioned as an manifestation of their refusal to accept their conditions of material marginality.

Physical Insecurity and Resistance

In addition to material marginality, participants also described physical insecurity as a central feature of their early life experiences. For a number of participants, for example, witnessing domestic violence and experiencing abuse and neglect were fundamental features of family life growing up. Participants offered a range of explanations for their experiences of abusive and coercive parenting, including not only deficient parenting skills, but also the effects of substance abuse and intergenerational traumas, and desperate attempts by their guardians to protect them from involvement in the destructive dynamics that existed within their neighborhoods. Experiences of violence at home seemed particularly typical among participants who grew up as wards of the state, as not only was their entry into state custody precipitated by abuse and neglect, but their experiences in foster care were often no better than those that brought them into the state’s custody in the first place. In the quote below, for example, Montrelle describes the severe abuse that he and his siblings endured both within their biological family as well as during their time in foster care:

24 I use the term guardian here in place of parent due to the fact that many participants reported living with other adults growing up, such as foster parents and other family members, many of whom also perpetrated violence against participants when they were children.
My mother, you know, when she was [high] off the drugs, she was a violent person. If we did anything, we got beaten. I remember accounts where she beat us for telling on her to my dad or just for doing anything she didn’t like—she would beat me and my brothers and sisters…. It’d be long periods of time where she would leave us in the house all day by ourself…. And then [pausing]… certain times the people [child welfare investigators] would knock on the door and my mother would take us to the back and hide us. I didn’t realize what she was doing until [I got older]. And then, one day, they finally came with case workers and police officers, and they took us away. They took my older brother, Anthony, myself, Riquelle, and my other sister, Angie, and they placed us in foster homes….

[After a number of brief placements,] the next foster home all of us got reunited back together. But that family, they just used to [pausing]… beat us for whatever…. They would do things to scare us. I remember one of the foster lady’s friends, he would—I don’t know what he had against me, but he always tried to do things to manipulate me. Stuff like that [voice straining]….

Then we got sent to another foster home where we spent there for seven years. The person—her name was Linda—she started off good, but months down later I start seeing her real intentions. She start beating us. And she made us call her “mother.” You know, she had anybody who was around us that was in a position of age—in a position of power—she let them beat us and stuff like that. I could remember she choke-slammin’ my brother, um, picking me up by my private parts only, and just beating us any and every way possible…. Once [child protection] found out we didn’t have heat again, they took us for the final time. And we was still thinkin’ even though she was a bad parent, you know, we was with her longer than we was with my mother and father, so she had instilled so much fear in us that we were trying to go back.

While a handful of participants reported experiencing physical insecurity within their homes as children, essentially every participant discussed the pervasive violence within their communities as a prominent element of their lives growing up. Participants recounted witnessing serious violence within their neighborhoods as youngsters, including beatings, robberies, shootings, kidnappings, and murders. Moreover, participants described being victimized themselves by such violence and increasingly so as they entered adolescence. Street gangs played an integral role in much of this neighborhood violence. This violence often extended into the local schools, which many participants described as being socially organized based on the gang dynamics within their wider communities. In short, when asked to describe
the communities in which they grew up, nearly every participant described his neighborhood primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of gangs and violence.\(^{25}\) Although it is important to note that incidents of violence remain rare occurrences even in areas with relatively high rates of violence, such as participants’ communities, the prominence of gangs and violence in participants’ accounts of their neighborhoods offers important insights into their subjective experiences of their neighborhoods and how these understandings may have worked to shape their worldviews. Indeed, the ubiquity of such violence in the eyes of study participants led many of them to view violence as an unavoidable fact of life and victimization as a reasonable expectation. Cassius, for example, gave the following description of his neighborhood growing up:

> [The neighborhood was] rough…. Drugs, shit, shootings, any—just damn-near anything. Know what I’m sayin’? Shit. One time I done seen a mu’fucka get robbed right in front of me—a couple times—with a shotgun. So I’m like, \textit{Damn!} Seein’ that growin’ up, you like, \textit{Shit, this what it is now}, you know?… It was kinda like the whole neighborhood, damn-near—everybody was on the same shit, you know? It was some book bag mu’fuckas—people [who] was goin’ to school and shit, straight role, all that type of shit. But it was mostly crooks…. I went to Emmitt Till [Elementary School], and that’s all that was in there was gangs….

Where I grew up at, it was mostly Stones, GDs, and MCs. Shit, Stones had 65th and shit, Vernon was the MCs and the Outlaws, you know what I’m sayin’? So, shit, it was kinda a mixture, but every block had they own order and shit…. See, 63rd, that’s the dividing line. Like, east and west, that’s different spots [gang territories], and north and south, that’s different spots, you know what I’m sayin’? So if you was north of the mu’fuckin’ train, you was the enemy, you know what I’m sayin’? If you was south of the train, you was the enemy. Like, the train tracks is the dividing spot. And then west of King Drive, that was, you know, [one gang]. And the east, same shit [another gang].

So, shit, I grew up around there for a minute, you know what I’m sayin’, seen how it was around there and shit. Not knowin’ I just came from, like, the suburbs, and they was still

\(^{25}\) Participants’ depictions of their neighborhoods as violent and gang-ridden, moreover, are likely inspired by their awareness of the nature of this research study. Additionally, violence and street gangs may figure more prominently in the minds of these research participants, who are gang members, than they would in the minds of other community residents. In other words, it is possible that asking different groups of community residents to describe these same neighborhoods would elicit a greater variety of descriptions.
doin’ the same shit out there. You know what I’m sayin’? So it really wasn’t shit new to me yet, it was just, like, city life now, you know?… It’s like, everywhere you go, you can’t escape the shit unless you move to another—Missouri or some shit like that. It’s Chicago—shit happens. This where it’s at.

Exacerbating the physical insecurity that pervaded participants’ communities was the often-antagonistic nature of relations between residents and law enforcement. Far from fulfilling their sworn duties to protect participants and other community residents from violent victimization, participants characterized the police as an additional source of violence with which they were forced to contend. Indeed, a number of participants described serious acts of violence committed against themselves and their peers by police officers, including even homicide. Yet, their adverse experiences with law enforcement extended far beyond such relatively rare acts of severe police violence. More pervasively, participants described what amounted to the criminalization of their very existence as young black men through regular profiling and harassment, illegal searches and orders to disperse, and verbal abuse. Tellingly, a number of participants likened the Chicago Police Department to a state-sponsored gang, employing violence and coercion in the pursuit of territorial control of local neighborhoods. Overall, participants reported a tremendous amount of contact with law enforcement and the criminal justice system, including a median of 8.5 arrests among the study’s 20 participants and adult felony convictions reported by 10 participants. In the quote below, Zeke describes the effects of witnessing severe police violence and experiencing the inherent paradox of “zero-tolerance” policing in which police attempts to prevent crime effectively criminalize community youth and simultaneously fail to prevent their victimization:

26 Harvey, an inner suburb just south of the city, for example, has rates of poverty and violence comparable to some of Chicago’s rougher communities.
27 It should be noted, however, that a number of participants expressed empathy for the difficult duties with which police officers are tasked, particularly those working in rough urban areas. Nonetheless, they roundly condemned the mistreatment that they reported receiving from law enforcement officials.
Man, like, when I just told you when I witnessed three murders, one of ’em the police did. [The guy] they killed, he was like a brother to me [voice shaking]. Man, when that happened, that’s what made me wanna just be down [join a gang] even more ‘cause that hurted me…. I was walkin’ up, finna—then I just see him runnin’ through the alley. And I just see a black police detective car that’s comin’. And then that’s when I just heard them shots and I just seen him fall. Man [pausing]… first I thought it was a dream I was finna wake up from. But it was real. And that just put a lot of heat in my heart…. 

[The police] be worryin’ about little stuff, especially around my ’hood. They said it’s “zero-tolerance.” They be worryin’ about us walkin’ in groups, [but] they don’t even be worryin’ about who they—like, man, they just let one of our guys get poked [robbed] the other night. And they be right there—and I know they be right there watchin’, like, they be in the park, just be right there. I don’t know if they be watchin’ or not, but they be in they car right there, just sittin’ right there.

Under these conditions, street gangs provided participants with a means of resisting the physical insecurity that permeated much of their early life experiences, particularly the violence within their neighborhoods. Indeed, whereas the specter of violent victimization within their households rapidly decreased as participants grew in size and strength during adolescence and the threat of police violence was viewed as beyond their control, participants faced the increasing threat and experience of violent victimization within their neighborhoods and schools during their teenage years.28 Gang membership, then, provided participants with resistance to physical insecurity through physical assistance in violent and potentially-violent situations as well as collective recourse in the event of personal victimization. In the following quote, for example, Montrelle describes these dynamics and offers insight into how experiences of violent victimization more generally serve as an essential context for the development of an impulse of resistance that is ultimately expressed most readily and fully within the street gang context:

So we ended up on Calumet Avenue stayin’ with this lady, Miss Stevens. I was 13 at this time, [and] I could already tell she was just no good. You know, she couldn’t physically beat us ’cause we wasn’t havin’ that. But she just used to try to mentally put

28 Outside of sibling quarrels, which often take place between young children, adolescents are more likely to be victimized by violence than people in any other age group. A number of biological and social factors contribute to this dynamic, such as decreased adult supervision, as compared to younger children, and a lack of impulse control related to unfinished brain development (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009; Schwarz, 2009).
us down and stuff like that, and try to get us to do things her way instead of just trying to figure out who we are and bein’ an adult, you know, figure out different solutions, she just tried to dominate us. And we were past the point where anybody was gonna dominate us. I had instilled it in my head that the last time I got a whoopin’ was gonna be the last time. Anybody else put they hands on me [voice straining], I’m of age, I can fight back now.

So when I lived with her, I start goin’ to Wendell Phillips High School. You know, I was a new kid, and it was a little rough ’cause the kids, they were crazy—they were savages. So eventually I had to turn into a savage to survive there…. And after a while, I just started—I didn’t care about a lot of things. I didn’t care about school, ’cause I was always forced to do it. See, if I don’t get a good grade or don’t do this, I would get a whoopin’—I would get beaten. Wasn’t nobody gonna beat me anymore. So it was no real motivation to continue to go to school. I was goin’ to school just to fight—just to see what I can do. Just to see who was gon’ try me or somebody I knew today. If anybody try one of me or my guys, it was crackin’….

[My friends and I] would be in big brawls with the GDs. Like, it would be five of us against 20 of them. And I used to—I’m lookin’ back on it, those brawls used to—I was able to take out my frustration from my mother beating me [voice cracking slightly], foster parents beating me, everybody beating me. And I was able to fight back, and that’s how I made a name for myself…. And, you know, once we got to fightin’ the GDs, people started noticin’ us—the Black Disciples started noticin’ us…. We really didn’t like the same people, and I felt like all of us was real niggas, so we all started hanging together. And we would be fighting the GDs, and we would also be with some of the Mickey Cobras off of Indiana Avenue. And they just took a liking to us, and they just loved us from the beginning, you know, we just would stay fighting, stay fighting. If they get into it, we would come on Indiana. If we get into it, they comin’ on Calumet.

In addition to such direct physical support, moreover, participants reported that gang membership often served to deter potential victimization, as well. Those looking for a robbery victim or simply someone toward whom they might direct their frustrations and aggression, for example, would generally avoid targeting groups of people such as gang members congregating in public. Moreover, such would-be victimizers would be less likely to victimize a known gang member, even if that individual was alone, due to the implied assurance of collective retaliation. Finally, street gangs provided participants not only with a constellation of established enemies, but also with a network of friends in allied gangs who were generally expected to provide safe passage and vouch for their allies. Thus, within a context of pervasive community violence and
acute physical insecurity, many participants viewed joining a gang not in terms of putting themselves at elevated risk for victimization, but as a means of deterring potential victimization. These considerations, moreover, were of paramount importance even for those participants who described their family lives in positive terms and their early childhoods as relatively sheltered. Cortez, for example, who reported growing up in a relatively stable, two-parent, working-class household, explained the inadequacy of his parents’ attempts to shelter him from the violence in his neighborhood and the role that the local street gang ultimately played in fulfilling that protective function:

> When I was young, I was a little sheltered…. I went to Catholic schools. So I guess that was my parents’ way of tryin’ to keep me out of trouble, but it still didn’t really work that much ’cause after school, I still gotta go back to the same neighborhood and the same block.…

> It was a lot goin’ on in our neighborhood. A lot! Literally, every day. Especially on warm days when it’s hot outside, that’s when everything get crazy, everybody get crazy. So it was a lot of those. I can remember times walking through Roseland,²⁹ might’ve got jumped or robbed. Now we gotta go back and find them, get my stuff back…. ’That’s the type of things that I was going through on a day-to-day basis…. [People are] thirsty lookin’ for people that don’t know somebody that they know—somebody that they can just do something to real quick, and then they ain’t gotta worry about nothing.…

> [So being a gang member,] it was, like, I can say I was never really worried about things happening to me. Like, I was never really worried about completely being by myself. I know if I make a phone call, I know I got 10, 15 guys coming. You know? I know if I’m in the neighborhood, I know people know me by face and I know that they know who I know. So just off that strength, it’s not a lot of things that I worry about…. A lot of problems gettin’ avoided, ’cause if I didn’t know the people that I did know, [I] probably wouldn’t be here right now.

The fact that participants grew up in communities in which street gangs were already entrenched further increased their chances of victimization. This was often the case regardless of whether or not they were official or recognized members of their neighborhood gang, as many

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²⁹ A community on Chicago’s far South Side whose violent reputation and location predominantly south of 100th Street has earned it the moniker the “Wild Hundreds.”
participants described being deemed guilty by association within their schools and wider communities simply for living in a neighborhood associated with a particular street gang. The possibility of victimization was further exacerbated by the relatively small geographic territory “controlled” by most street gangs—often only a few city blocks—and the proximity of rival gangs, whose territories often bordered one another directly. The protective and retaliatory benefits of gang membership, then, were of particular salience given these circumstances. Lamont, for example, described these dynamics as follows:

For my generation, we didn’t have no beefs. We grew up takin’ on the older brothers’ beef…. You inherit beef because [pausing]… I was in sixth or seventh, eighth grade, they was down there killin’ people. Now I wanna go and walk to 61st Street, I can’t because of what they did…. Mu’fucka like, “Where you live at?”… “Man, I live on Stony,” but I ain’t in no gang.” “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! You live on Stony, you Stone.” It ain’t no—it don’t matter. The streets dictate—unless you got on bifocals, some Urkel pants, some long socks—“You [one of the Stones] off the other end, we don’t trust you ’cause you live down there with ’em.”

So now, since I’m ’a get bullied on for livin’ down there, I might as well get a gun and protect myself with them. ’Cause when I get jumped on, I gotta go back and tell my friends. They gon’ say, “You said you wasn’t with us!” You see what I’m sayin”? So you have now inherited what the people have done before you, whether they went and killed [someone] or did this or did that. Because now when you say you from Bull Town, mu’fucka like, “Aw, man, 10 years ago, them niggas, they shot”—so a mu’fucka finna shoot you based on something that was 10 years ago. You 20, you was 10 years old then. You ain’t have nothin’ to do with that! But that’s how it go.

In summary, within a context of seemingly-ubiquitous violence and strained police-community relations, street gangs offered participants protection against the constant specter of violent victimization. For many participants, then, joining a gang represented an expression of their refusal to simply accept the pervasive sense of physical insecurity that characterized public life in their communities.

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30 A reference to Stony Island Avenue, a portion of which runs along the eastern edge of the Woodlawn community and has been associated with the Black P. Stones for more than half a century.

31 Steve Urkel, a fictional character on the popular 1990s TV sit-com Family Matters, was known for his nerdy persona and attire, which included high-water pants worn with suspenders.
Psychological Domination and Resistance

Participants described their experiences of material marginality and physical insecurity and the ways in which their wider environment was shaped by these dynamics as having profound psychological effects. Understandably, growing up in low-income families in impoverished, segregated, under-resourced, and blighted communities and the trauma of witnessing and experiencing severe violence on a regular basis can have serious mental health implications. Participants discussed stress (post-traumatic and otherwise), depression, isolation, frustration, anger, anxiety, apathy, and self-doubt as among the adverse effects they faced as a result of these experiences. These effects were exacerbated by the dearth of mental health services and other resources within these communities that might have worked to moderate the psychological impact of their experiences. Recreational resources that might at least provide residents with an attractive outlet for engaging in constructive activities, moreover, were likewise in short supply in these neighborhoods. Below, Cortez connects the psychological effects of persistent hardship and trauma and a lack of constructive outlets with elevated levels of violence in his community:

A lot of young men now, they need more stuff to do. They need more stuff to do to help with they anger, to help with they stress and stuff like that, instead of actually goin’ out on the streets and takin’ it out on other people. They need more activities, more things that they like doin’, and they need to be out here doing it. You know, they closed down the YMCA by my house. That was so dumb. Now, it’s like what are they supposed to do? Well, they closed that down when I was young, so what we supposed to do now? You know, now we on the block. Now that’s where we at…

You know, a lot of people look at it like, “They not doing shit for us, so I’m gon’ do what I wanna do. The police not helpin’ us, so I’m gon’ do what I wanna do.” You know,

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32 Many of the psychological effects of participants’ experiences are evident in the quotes included in the preceding sections, particularly in participants’ perceptions of the deteriorated state of their neighborhoods, their difficulties finding employment, the nature of their relationships with law enforcement, and their attempts to cope with the violence pervading their lives. Additional examples will be discussed in this section.
that’s how a lot of stuff gets looked at…. I feel like—’cause I’m 23 now. We ain’t—
I’ve never had none of that.

As alluded to in the quote above, in addition to their acute psychological effects and
attendant implications, participants’ experiences of marginalization and insecurity also
fundamentally shaped their broader views of the world and their place within it. More
specifically, participants interpreted these experiences—both their own personal experiences as
well as their wider communities’ collective experiences—as a byproduct of their maligned racial
and class statuses. A number of participants noted Chicago’s hard-earned reputation as one of
the most segregated cities in the country, and racial segregation, along with violence and
poverty, was among the principal adjectives participants used to describe their neighborhoods.
Participants, thus, understood their experiences as young black men from the ghetto as the
byproduct of willful neglect, if not intentional design—the result of “white society’s” attempts to
contain, control, and exploit their communities. These experiences and participants’ view that
they were the result of their social position as a marginalized and denigrated population
ultimately resulted in a profound sense of despair and social alienation. Cassius, for example,
explained the sense of hopelessness that colored his worldview even before he reached
adolescence, comparing the breakdown in municipal maintenance in his neighborhood with the
meticulous upkeep of Chicago’s central business district and wealthy white neighborhoods as
emblematic of his community’s marginalization:

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago, shit, in poverty, you know, low income, all that
type of shit…. I grew up without a father. My grandma raised me and shit like that…. [My mother was a] crackhead…. When I was about eight, we used to live in, like, hotels
and shit ’cause we couldn’t get no crib ’cause my OG [grandmother’s] credit was fucked

33 Chicago remains the most segregated large city in the United States, but is now the third most segregated city
overall, behind Milwaukee and Detroit (Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012).
up. 34 Shit, once she built her credit up and shit, we finally got our crib right here on 65th and Vernon.…

Like, sometimes I was tryin’ to stay positive, but then I kept on thinkin’ like, Man, it’s like the white mu’fuckas tryin’ to put us down and shit, you know? So it really wasn’t no hope, that’s what I was feelin’ like. And this was at an early age—I started seein’ life like that at an early age—about 10, you know? So, shit, [I was] like, “Fuck it, I’m out here,” you know? That’s what it was, shit.…

’Cause they don’t really care unless it’s, you know, white society and shit like that. Like, our street is—on 63rd Street, it’s nothing but potholes down the street. Now if you go on Madison or Chicago Avenue, shit swift as hell down the street, you know what I’m sayin’, you ridin’ good. But that’s how you really just see how, like, it’s so biased.…

That’s how black people look at it, like, “Man, them white people don’t give a fuck about us.” Basically, that’s the overall to it.

Given their perspective on the issues facing their communities, participants understandably expressed no faith that the political system, as currently constituted, could serve as a means to alleviate these issues. Indeed, participants perceived the government as playing an integral role in the perpetuation of the racialized system of oppression in which they lived and, as such, fundamentally corrupted and illegitimate. In support of their views, participants cited recent high-profile cases of political corruption involving local politicians, the infrequency with which local elected officials—even those who supposedly lived in their communities—visited their neighborhoods, and the lack of change in their communities in spite of the election of a black president ostensibly from the South Side of Chicago. 35 Moreover, participants generally viewed government efforts to address violence and other issues within their communities as token gestures designed to temporarily appease fleeting media interest or maintain a façade of concern, ultimately revealing the political expendability of their communities. In the end, these

34 OG is an abbreviation for original gangster. The term is typically used on the streets to refer to a respected older or retired gang member. In Chicago, young people often refer to their mothers humorously as their OGs. Here, Cassius uses the term in describing his grandmother who raised him.
35 Indeed, Barack Obama’s home is merely blocks away from the Washington Park and Grand Boulevard communities from which a number of the study participants hailed.
views contributed to a sense of cynicism among participants with respect to the state and the political process. Memphis, for example, described his utter demoralization following a rare face-to-face meeting with the mayor of Chicago in his community during which the mayor solicited input from him and other participants of a subsidized employment program only to ignore their pleas to continue the program:

I talked to Rahm Emanuel exactly how I’m talkin’ to you! Honest to God truth, through Better Community…. We tryin’ to beg him to extend this shit, bro. He said, “Alright, if we extend the program, what’s gon’ happen?” I say, “If y’all stop this program, what the fuck y’all think we gon’ do?” I say, “To be honest, this program saved a lot of lives over these summers, mu’fuckas workin’! Y’all seen it—y’all see the papers, y’all see the statistics, y’all see the shit. But once y’all take this shit away, where y’all think people have to go? Right back to the streets, you know what I’m sayin’, this all we know.” And they shake they head, they do that shit, “Mm-hm, yeah,” and don’t do shit, bro. So it’s a waste of fucking time talkin’ to them, man. But this comin’ from a mu’fucka from the streets! We tellin’ you how this shit is. Nigga, you know what’s goin’ on out here, man. Without this shit, bro, it’s gon’ crack out here every day….

Why [the program] just gotta be a summer thing? Just so y’all can make sure we live through the summer? Mu’fuckas die in the fall, mu’fuckas die in the winter. What the fuck?! So why stop this shit, you know? And they stopped it, so look where we at: right here on the block….

It’s so fucked up now, it’s like your dreams crushed, you know? Why? Because, man, everybody fucked up: Man, they ain’t gon’ fuck with us [help us], man, we black. Man, you know, it’s always a criticism or excuse, you know? So it’s like, that shit really takin’ mu’fuckas dreams and, like, demolishin’ them, you know what I’m sayin’?

Under these conditions of psychological domination, street gangs provided participants with essential means of resistance. One strategy of resistance that gangs utilized was providing participants with emotional support rooted in their common experiences and concern for one another. In this sense, gangs acted as informal support groups within which members collectively coped with the oppressive conditions and experiences that often pervaded their lives and their various psychological effects. Moreover, shaped by these dynamics themselves, participants’ families often lacked the ability to mediate the effects of these conditions and
experiences. Below, for example, Marco cites as the decisive factor to join his local gang the
support that its members offered him as they all struggled to come to terms with the murder of
their close friend at the hands of law enforcement—support which, tellingly, his family, school,
and other potential sources of support failed to provide for him. Additionally, he describes the
enduring importance of the supportive relationships among he and his comrades as they
continued to confront difficult situations and circumstances in their lives:

One [event] that pushed me in that direction [was] when Tre died. That messed my head
up, man. ’Cause that was, like, me being from where I’m from, I never actually felt pain
of losin’ somebody. You know? Especially somebody that was your homie, you know?
And then, second, I never saw a dead body, especially that was your homie, though, you
feel me? And that messed me up, ’cause I was 15, man. And I saw it happen, you know,
the whole lil’ process when he got shot. And it just messed with my head, man. And
then that kinda drove me farther into the streets. I’ll be in school, couldn’t even
concentrate thinking about bro, get to cryin’ and leave. Go on the block where
everything feel good, though, you know?…

When you got problems at home or something like that—and then, like, the relationship
with my brother, it wasn’t no brother-to-brother relationship. He used to try to be my
father, you feel me, on that mode. And then when I moved up here and got to kickin’ it
outside a lot, it’s like these my brothers, you know, brothers I never had and stuff, you
feel me?… I felt love—it really be that love, man…. I don’t got no relationship with my
sisters and my mama. Just last night, my sister was cryin’, tellin’ me how she hate me as
a brother. On BD.36 ’Cause, man, it’s just—it’s a lot of shit. And then, like, that lil’
argument we had at the crib—what I do? Run to the block. Forget about it. You know?
In my comfort zone with my brothers, just chillin’….  

It’s crazy. Like my homie, Boosie, who’s my right-hand man. Folks be with that drillin’
[shooting] shit, though, for real. Like, he overdo it, though, you feel me? Folks, like, a
killer. This my homie, though. His dad used to beat his ass, you know? His dad was in
the Navy and shit. And then he just tellin’ me—damn-near in tears tellin’ me stories.
That’s how it be, though. It’s like everybody got some lil’ type of story, you know?
Some worse than others, but some people get affected by something which make ’em like
they is, though.

As is evident in the quote from Marco above, the emotional support that street gangs
provided their members was rooted in a collective culture of acceptance and brotherly love, and

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36 Swearing on one’s gang or on the name of a legendary leader of one’s gang in the course of routine conversation is common practice among many gang members.
participants frequently described their gangs in familial terms and referred to their fellow members as their brothers. Indeed, for a number of participants, these collectives offered the closest approximations to caring and durable family relationships in their lives, and many participants talked about joining their respective street gangs in terms of “coming home.” The acceptance and love offered by street gangs, moreover, stood in direct contrast to their experiences of denigration and marginalization as young black men from the ghetto within mainstream society, including academic failure, perpetual unemployment, and criminalization, and the resulting internalization of despair, alienation, cynicism, self-doubt, and shame. Even community organizations and programs ostensibly dedicated to working with “at-risk” youth often stigmatized participants or flat-out refused to engage with them, a phenomenon which more than one participant characterized as organizations “not wanting to get their hands dirty.” The unconditional love and acceptance that constituted a prominent feature of the gang culture in participants’ neighborhoods, then, represented a radical departure from these experiences and their attendant sentiments and ultimately provided participants with indispensable resistance to their experiences of psychological domination. Antonio, for example, described the centrality of his gang’s acceptance of him in the face of the constant rejection and stigmatization that accompanied his experiences as a foster child as well as his status as a young African American man who grew up in poverty:

I was in DCFS [the Department of Child and Family Services] from three until I was—what?—20, 21. ’Cause [pausing]… I mean, I went to different family members but, you know, as a kid it was kinda difficult ’cause I’d try to get people to try to understand what I was saying, and nobody will listen to a kid. So it was kinda difficult. So they said, “Oh, he’s a bad kid.” “He’s a bad kid.” But I don’t think I was a bad kid…. My oldest cousin, he lived on 53rd and May [a gang set]…. and he was the only one that, like, actually really listened and took the time to really talk to me….

37 For members of the Black P. Stones, Mickey Cobras, and other gangs associated with the People Nation, the term Brother is also used as a proper noun in reference to fellow members of these gangs.
[Being a member of a gang] was more of, like, just bein’ able to be out there, and be surrounded by people that’s in the same position as you. You don’t feel no different—you don’t feel inferior to them. You feel me? You go into a work zone, mu’fuckas got suit and ties and shit, you know, and you feel like, OK, I’m the black dude in the room, or I’m the uneducated dude in the room, so whatever they talkin’ ’bout, I can’t be a part of that ’cause I don’t know about that. You feel me? But if I’m out here, we talking about the same thing…. I mean, look, I’d rather have these niggas than not have nobody in my corner at all, man, for real….

[Community organizations and programs are] reachin’ a certain demographics, man. That’s what it is. And that—not to sound racist or anything, but they stick to primarily Caucasian, Hispanic, all that. When it comes to… black American society or anything of that nature, it’s more of a—you deal with it from a distance. You feel me? It’s like when you got the little [stick] with the snake, you gotta hold it from a distance so it don’t attack you. It’s—people deal with it at arms’ length.

However, not only did gangs offer participants acceptance, love, and support, they also provided them with a sense of collective and personal identity. As described earlier, participants were ascribed a stigmatized and despised collective identity as impoverished, ghettoized African Americans—a collective identity of which they were acutely aware and which fundamentally shaped their life experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. Moreover, their attendant failure to achieve success within mainstream institutions left them with few options for challenging their collective identity as members of a denigrated population or for constructing a positive personal identity. In other words, at an early age, participants found themselves in a world in which their dignity was consistently assaulted and in which they were set up to—and often did—fail according to conventional standards of success. Understandably, participants resisted internalizing their rejection and found a vehicle for this resistance within street gangs, whose defiance of such conventional expectations made them neighborhood heroes in the eyes of the study participants. Indeed, within the oppressive context within which they grew up, many participants perceived these gangs as the only viable source of positive identification. Below, for example, Lamont explains the importance of both the collective and personal identities provided
by the neighborhood gang, as well as the ways in which these identities facilitated resistance to
the material marginality, physical insecurity, and psychological domination that represented the
experienced and prospective alternative:

I mean, the number one thing that really sparked [joining a gang] for me was really just
growin’ up poor…. Poverty brings something about where a person feels [pausing]…
just sad and alone…. I wanted to feel like I belonged to something. And, shit, when you
ain’t got no money, you broke, you wanna look good, you wanna ride good, you wanna
be with the big boys, you know, that’s who I was around, that’s who I wanted to be
under…. In my community, it’s only one thing—it’s Black Stone….

So, you know, havin’ that sense of belonging to this particular gang, it felt good because,
shit, I wasn’t a lame. I wasn’t one of them kids that you could run up on and run in they
pockets and take money out they pocket. I wasn’t the kid who mama was takin’ them to
tap dancin’ and piano lesso

In perhaps the ultimate act of psychological resistance, participants constructed
“resistance identit[jies]” (Castells, 2010, p. 8) that inverted society’s view of their communities
and the people in them as necessarily dishonored and irredeemable: “the ’hood” and “the guys”
became their fundamental sources of identity and pride. Thus, as opposed to feeling ashamed by
the poverty and violence of their neighborhoods, the roughness of their communities and the
ability of their comrades to survive under such conditions became badges of honor. Failure to
adequately adapt to the prevailing conditions, then, almost always through joining a street gang,
left one open to victimization, which, outside of the context of gang warfare, was viewed as a
sign of weakness and isolation.38 The wages of not joining the local gang, then, meant that, to
some degree, the same exclusion participants faced with respect to mainstream society would be
replicated on the streets of their own neighborhoods: that they would face denigration based on a

38 Participants’ very different interpretation of violent victimization within the context of gang warfare will be
explored further in Chapter 7.
perceived status—a “nigger from the ghetto” to the wider world, a “lame” or a “bitch” to those in
the streets—or, perhaps worse, that they would be relegated to an anonymity born of
indifference. Indeed, study participants’ personal, neighborhood, and gang identities generally
became inseparable, as gang membership became the cornerstone of personal identity, gang
identity was rooted in the identities of both its members and the neighborhood, and
neighborhood identity was constructed through the reputation of the local gang. In the following
quote from Carlos, for example, he describes the symbiosis and significance of gang,
neighborhood, and personal identity:

Growin’ up in the hood, you gotta know how to fight, shit. You know what I’m sayin’? Mu’fuckas gon’ test you every day, you feel me? Everybody gon’ pull your card, G. It’s either, do you got a card to pull or you just a hoe. It’s either you a gangsta or a bitch, nigga. Make you mind up, you feel me?… Some niggas go to school and be like, “I’m in this shit,” you feel me? “Yeah, you from that hood, but you a bitch in your ’hood—you ain’t nobody in your ’hood.”…

Everybody know everybody from the streets, you feel me? You know who is who, you know what I’m sayin’, if y’all on that map. If you ain’t on that map—like, say if your ’hood was from 41st and St. Lawrence. Like, everybody know the Low End, but we gon’ be like, “They ain’t on the map, though,” you feel me, “they radar ain’t even hittin’ like that.” So you ain’t even really on shit over that way….

Like, that’s just like this map right here, shit [pointing to a map of the city of Chicago hanging on the wall]: everything is what your ’hood is, you feel me? Shit, that’s the mob, shit. Give you a for instance: 51st and Cottage [Grove]—Young Money. That’s a mob, shit, they deep as hell, you feel me? Like, it could be 40, 50 niggas; depends on how big your ’hood is, you feel me? However that shit go, shit….

Within a context of acute racial and class oppression and in the absence of conventional
forms of social support and positive identification, street gangs provided participants with both
socioemotional support as well as a resistance identity. In these ways, gang membership helped

39 The Low End is a moniker for Chicago’s historic South Side black ghetto, which was also home to the lion’s share of the city’s public housing projects prior to their wide-scale demolition over the last two decades. The area is located east of the Dan Ryan expressway roughly between Cullerton Street (2000 south) and Garfield Boulevard (5500 south)—that is, the low-numbered streets of the city’s South Side.
participants resist the deleterious psychological effects of the oppressive conditions and experiences that shaped their lives.

**Summary and Discussion**

This chapter presents a framework for understanding street gangs as a form of resistance to the oppressive conditions that shaped study participants’ early life experiences. These oppressive conditions included, most prominently, various forms of material marginality, physical insecurity, and psychological domination. Yet, participants did not passively accept these conditions nor the psychological domination that accompanied them. Instead, they turned to street gangs, which provided them with various resources and opportunities for resistance. More specifically, gang membership offered participants a means of resisting material marginality by providing opportunities to generate income in the underground economy as well as through collective caretaking strategies. Together, these activities provided a crucial safety net that helped many participants meet their basic needs and afforded them a limited, but important, degree of economic empowerment. Street gangs also offered participants a means of resisting physical insecurity by deterring potential victimization, providing support during violent and potentially-violent encounters, and mobilizing for collective retaliation following instances of actual victimization. Within a context of expected victimization, participants generally viewed joining a gang not in terms of placing themselves at elevated risk for victimization, but as a means of achieving a greater sense of physical security. Gang membership also provided participants with a variety of social, emotional, and psychological

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40 Participants’ descriptions of these conditions and experiences are strongly corroborated by the statistical realities of life in their communities (see the Research Participants in Context section on pages 51–52).
resources that facilitated their resistance to psychological domination, including emotional support, love and acceptance, and a sense of personal and collective identity. The context of the gang collective, moreover, enabled participants to effectively subvert mainstream society’s disparaging views of them, their comrades, and their neighborhoods, reinterpreting the very characteristics for which they were so denigrated—their poverty, their blackness, the severe conditions of their neighborhoods, and the toughness with which they navigated these neighborhoods—as sources of pride and positive identification.

The connection between street gangs and experiences of marginalization and deprivation, particularly the experience of living in urban slums and ghettos, has been a central theme of gang research for nearly a century. Yet, scholars have long disputed the exact nature of the link between gangs and urban marginality, offering a range of interpretations to explain this correlation. For Thrasher and others of the Chicago School tradition (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942), gangs were viewed as a product of the social disorganization inherent in urban slums—the inability of adults and institutions in these neighborhoods to provide effective socialization and adequate supervision to adolescent residents. Others have offered a wide range of alternative interpretations, including influential theories that understand gangs as: a byproduct of the distinctive social organization of marginalized communities (Jankowski, 1991; Suttles, 1968, 1972; Venkatesh, 1997, 2000, 2006; Whyte, 1943), a manifestation of the “culture” of poor neighborhoods (Miller, 1958), a subculture within which poor young men are able to achieve social status (Cohen, 1955), and a result of differential neighborhood opportunity structures (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

Although these theories were often framed in ways that worked to combat xenophobic and racist interpretations of street gangs by explaining them in deracialized terms (Hagedorn,
2006), a number of scholars have more recently challenged such interpretations, incorporating analyses of race and ethnicity into street gang theory (Brotherton, 2015; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Diamond, 2009; Hagedorn, 2008; Levenson, 2013; J. Moore, 1978, 1991; C. Taylor, 1990). Vigil (2002), for example, a leading scholar of Los Angeles street gangs, has argued that these gangs are the result of “multiple marginality,” a complex set of “macrohistorical and macrostructural forces… [that] lead to economic insecurity and lack of opportunity, fragmented institutions of social control, poverty, and psychological and emotional barriers among large segments of the [city’s] ethnic minority communities” (p. 7; see also Vigil, 1988). Similarly, Padilla (1992) framed the ethnic segregation and paucity of resources and opportunities for conventional achievement within Chicago’s Puerto Rican community as “a system of domination” (p. 5) and argued that many black and Latino youth growing up under such conditions “have lost faith in the capacity of the society to work on their behalf” (p. 2). Within this context, Padilla found that the Puerto Rican street gang that he studied functioned primarily as an “ethnic enterprise” (p. 3) organized around the sale of illicit drugs, offering youth in the community a rare and attractive opportunity to generate income. Taking a broader view, Hagedorn (2008) contended that the failure of the social movements of the 1960s to alter conditions within America’s ghettos, coupled with deindustrialization, has resulted in “impossible conditions” (p. 49) within these communities and a profound sense of ethnoracial demoralization. Street gangs in U.S. cities, then, like other groups of armed young men across the globe, represent attempts by “the ‘socially excluded’ [to] defensively create… [resistance] identities to protect their personality and community against the uncertainties and injustices of globalization” (Hagedorn, 2008, p. 60).
The theory of street gang resistance presented in this chapter clearly lends support to these more critical theories. Study participants’ early life experiences, for example, largely parallel the oppressive conditions that give rise to and perpetuate street gangs and gang membership within marginalized communities of color, as described by the scholars cited above. In this sense, the experiences of participants and other African American gang members and the communities in which they are embedded are fundamentally different than those of the European ethnic immigrant groups of the early-twentieth century whose short stay in the slums was but a brief diversion on the way to full racial, social, economic, and political integration (see Jung, 2009; Omi & Winant, 1994). Participants’ explicitly racialized interpretations of these experiences, moreover, corroborate Hagedorn’s (2008) assertion that modern street gangs are fundamentally shaped by ethnoracial demoralization in the face of persistent racism and marginalization and that gangs constitute as a form of “resistance identity” within this context. Castells (2010), the architect of the concept, described resistant identities as being generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society…. [thus,] inverting the terms of oppressive discourse. (Castells, 2010, pp. 8–9)

Clearly, the description above is consistent with the findings presented in this chapter, particularly the discussion on pages 88–91. The study findings also support Padilla’s (1992) conceptualization of the ways in which street gangs facilitate resistance to experiences of economic marginality and exclusion through participation in the underground economy (see also C. Taylor, 1990; Venkatesh, 2006; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000).

The major theoretical contribution of this study’s findings, then, is in its synthesis of these and other existing concepts as well as new conceptual elements into a broader and more flexible framework of resistance. Most centrally, this framework classifies the functions of street
gangs in terms of the avenues of resistance they provide to their members in the face of oppressive early life experiences, particularly material marginalization, physical insecurity, and psychological domination. These abstracted concepts comprise a variety of specific experiences and practices, which allows the framework to explain a relatively wide range of rationales that individuals identify for joining their respective gangs and the various functions and meanings of these collectives while also maintaining conceptual cohesion. Thus, this framework accounts for gang members who emphasize the economic opportunities afforded through gang membership, such as those described by Padilla (1992) and C. Taylor (1990), those who stress the potency of gangs’ resistance identities, such as those described by Hagedorn (2008) and Brotherton and Barrios (2004), as well as those who emphasize the protective functions, such as those described by Klein (1971) and Suttles (1968, 1972).41

In conclusion, the findings presented in this chapter support Hagedorn’s (2015) contention that “gangs and gang members are not one thing” (p. 6). Moreover, they suggest that the reasons that young people join gangs and the functions and meanings of these collectives in the lives of their members are similarly diverse. These findings, however, point to the centrality of resistance in understanding these rationales, functions, and meanings, and in ultimately explaining the persistence and importance of street gangs within marginalized urban communities. Yet, street gangs and processes and forms of resistance are not invariable, but are, rather, dynamic and historically contingent (see Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2008; Levenson, 2013). The following chapters, which explore the rebellions within Chicago’s African American street gangs and their radical reconfiguration since the dawn of the millennium, will elucidate this argument.

41 Existing research in this area, however, tends to focus on the role of the threat of violence from existing gangs in sparking the initial, defensive formation of other gangs and/or maintaining their cohesion over time.
V. FINDINGS: POPULIST GANG RESISTANCE AND THE SHATTERING OF
CHICAGO’S BLACK STREET ORGANIZATIONS

As illustrated in the literature review, Chicago has, perhaps, the longest and most storied

gang history of any American city. The most recently chronicled chapter in this history involved
the reconfiguration of the city’s hierarchical, cross-neighborhood street gangs in the late 1980s
and 1990s as outlaw-capitalist organizations in the wake of deindustrialization, intensifying
urban disinvestment, mass incarceration, and the crack cocaine epidemic (Hagedorn, 2006, 2008,
2015; Padilla, 1992; Ralph, 2010, 2014; Venkatesh, 1997, 2000, 2006; Venkatesh & Levitt,
2000). Study participants, however, described their gangs—ostensibly many of the same gangs
described in the literature cited above—in very different terms. Indeed, in many ways,
participants explained the current state of Chicago’s street gangs in direct contrast to their 1990s
predecessors. How did such a fundamental transformation occur, and what factors contributed
to this transformation? This chapter explores the process by which Chicago’s black street
organizations weakened and eventually shattered during the first decade of the twenty-first
century. Before exploring these findings, however, the following section will briefly revisit
Chicago’s black street gangs as they existed at the dawn of the millennium. This brief section
will provide an essential foundation for understanding their organizational decline, explored in
the subsequent sections of this chapter, as well as the findings presented in the following two
chapters.

(Briefly) Revisiting the 1990s: Chicago Gangs as Corporate-Style Street Organizations

Participants described their gangs during the late 1990s and early 2000s in ways that
strongly corroborated the literature’s depiction of Chicago’s street gangs during that period as

42 These dynamics will be explored in the following chapter.
hierarchical, cross-neighborhood street organizations. With respect to structure, participants stated that these organizations comprised a number of neighborhood-based sets—that is, chapters or factions—each of which operated at the local level throughout the city. Gang members, then, identified themselves as part of a geographically-specific set (for example, Killa Ward or Lamron) within a wider street organization, or nation (for example, the Gangster Disciple Nation or Black Disciple Nation). The membership of these sets was relatively large, often numbering in the dozens, and the range of members’ ages often spanned multiple generations, illustrating the institutionalized nature of these groups (see also Hagedorn, 2008; Ralph, 2014). Participants described the leadership structures within these sets as rigid and hierarchical, with divisions of labor that included a number of committees as well as demarcated roles for women and younger members. These leadership structures were also reproduced within the street wider organizations, which formalized and coordinated instrumental relationships between their various chapters. Organizational literature detailing each gang’s history, values, symbols, laws, practices, and prayers served to legitimize these leadership hierarchies, delineate prescriptions for member behavior, and socialize the gang’s members by providing them with a comprehensive framework for collective identity, values, and action. In these ways, Chicago’s black street organizations during this period were largely carrying on the traditions and practices they had established during their respective formations some two or three decades earlier. Lamont, for example, explained the workings of the Black P. Stones during his adolescence as follows:

43 The analysis presented in this section is largely based on interviews conducted with two relatively older gang members from long-established gang neighborhoods who were able to describe first-hand their respective gangs as they existed during this period. However, the study’s younger participants were also generally familiar with these dynamics, as most had grown up in gang neighborhoods and had observed and absorbed the gang culture of that era through the involvement of older brothers, uncles, cousins, and neighbors.

44 Chicago’s street gangs have long eschewed the “gang” label and have referred to themselves as street organizations and nations since the 1960s.
Every decision that is made is made by a top leader in the Black P. Stone Nation, which is a General. And if any decision is made without a General, the next person that’s in charge is the Mufti. If the Mufti have not made a decision, and somebody act on a decision that has not been agreed upon, violations will be taking place. Nobody without no rank within the Black Stones of what I’m speakin’ about—I don’t know what go on in other communities, but in my community—rank outweigh everything.

So the Black Stones have something called Jumu’ah. It’s part of Islam, right? So on Fridays at seven o’clock, all of the Brothers who call themselves Black P. Stone supposed to have their meetings goin’ on so that they’re meeting at a particular time to do everything that they need to do. When the Black P. Stone Nation was runnin’ the way that it really, you know, was runnin’, that’s how all of ’em correlated. One thing about the larger group is the Generals meet with Generals. So Generals all over the city will meet with Generals from all over the city in one place. Muftis meet with Muftis from all over the place. But that’s how you get order, structure, in such a way where everybody’s on one accord. So it’s really a structured puzzle piece that comes together.

Headquarters dictate and control—look, they want this General to get elected. If he gettin’ elected, he need to visit the body [the organization’s central leadership]. The body have to question him: “You a General. What’s Act 1?” You know, the Stones got different laws—it’s called Acts. If you break a Act… it’s a jury that hear that. So that separate a Soldier from a Mufti to a General. Because as you get up, you need certain papers [pieces of organizational literature] at certain levels. The Stones are real [pausing]… iffy on knowledge that you received and who you givin’ it out to. They got they own prayer, they got they own laws, they got they own everything—they own world.

My duties varied because I was a young Soldier. So I may be workin’ on this particular committee. So what a lot of people don’t know is gangs are broken up into committees. Right? So when a war is about to occur in the community or amongst two gangs, if they’re structured the right way, the way that I’ve seen it is, it’s not just gonna be someone sayin’, “Oh, we’re goin’ to war.” It’s a group of guys who are in charge of those particular things. [The women in the gang], we don’t call ’em Stones, we call ’em Roses, right? ’Cause they’re sisters. The Black Stones is brought up on such of a structure of Islam and things of that nature. And with that, it’s not a woman duty to get dirty. A woman would keep drugs, guns, or, you know, cook, chill, count money, get the drugs together. They’d be your lookout people. A woman could take a pound of weed—you give it to her, put it in her purse, the police would never stop her. Things of that nature. So those are your disguises. Little kids like me were used to move certain things ‘cause I wouldn’t get stopped. So, I’m walkin’ down the street with a football equipment, but in my other bag I got three guns, six ounces of weed, I’m finna do a drop-off for one of the Generals, get his money, bring it back.

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45 Mufti, an Arabic word, denotes a scholar and interpreter of Islamic law. The Black P. Stones have incorporated Islamic tenets and symbolism extensively into their organizational culture, as Lamont describes later in this quote (see also N. Moore & Williams, 2011). This is also true, albeit to a lesser degree, with the Vice Lords, Mickey Cobras, and other People-allied gangs, as well (Hagedorn, 2006; Jacobs, 1977).
Participants described drug distribution as the major function of their street gangs during this period. Thus, given this economic focus, the hierarchical leadership structures of these gangs approximated those of conventional corporate organizations. In practical terms, gang leadership reaped a disproportionate amount of the profits from these economic endeavors and autocratically dictated organizational policy. The economic predominance of gang leaders over rank-and-file gang soldiers, for example, included mandates to participate in the periodic sale of drugs whose profits were funneled entirely to the organizations’ central leadership. Participants stated that failure to comply with these and other organizational policies resulted in “violations,” which generally consisted of various forms of physical beatings. Violations, then, were employed as a means of enforcing organizational policy and compelling members’ compliance with the orders of gang leaders more generally. In particular, a member’s failure to carry out acts of violence against the gang’s enemies or to refrain from violence that had not been authorized would similarly result in violations, as gang leaders monopolized the sanctioning of violence both internally and with respect to gang warfare. In line with their economic inclinations, the gang wars of this era were typically fought over control of illicit drug markets, and the allure of unprecedented profits and power effectively shattered many of Chicago’s longstanding gang alliances and turned fraternal gangs against one another.\textsuperscript{46} Dictated by centralized gang leadership, the drug wars of the 1990s were fought by rank-and-file gang soldiers and were among the bloodiest in the city’s history. Gang literature and appeals to collectivism were employed by gang leaders to justify their inordinate power and income and the subordinate position of gang foot soldiers, who overwhelmingly carried out and were victimized

\textsuperscript{46} These fraternal gang conflicts included fierce wars between the Gangster Disciples and Black Disciples, the Vice Lords and Four Corner Hustlers, and the Latin Folks’ Maniac, Insane, and Almighty families. See Hagedorn (2015), Kotlowitz (1991), Popkin et al. (2000), Venkatesh (1997, 2000), and Venkatesh and Levitt (2000).
by the violence of these wars. Rank-and-file members’ aspirations of gang mobility also worked to sustain these arrangements. In the quote below, Roosevelt describes these dynamics as they existed within his gang around the turn of the century:

It was never one gang in one neighborhood. It was always different gangs in one neighborhood—five different gangs in [my] neighborhood. So that was a real problem. And everybody had the same circumstances of takin’ care of they business and watchin’ over they back and makin’ sure they made they money. So we was all fightin’ for the same thing, basically.… And then, you know, that was a issue ’cause we always wanted they money. They was probably makin’ more money th’n us, so we had to beat them up or kill them off to make they money and step on they territory, just to eat and make our money and bring our money back home and to the gang. And then we all had put our money together to make sure that our gangs can prosper more.…

And then we’d have days where we’d have “Nation packs”—where you have to serve drugs just for the Nation.47 You wasn’t gettin’ paid for it, this is for our organization to make sure we had money for our parties, our guns, takin’ care of our blocks, makin’ sure we had taken care of our Brothers, and makin’ sure we had our work [drugs] every time. So you wouldn’t get paid for that, it was just for the Nation. It was just makin’ sure that we always had something to keep our organization going.… So in order for you to come over here, if you wanted to sell your pack, you gotta sell a Nation pack first.…

And if you was comin’ up short with money, you was gon’ get violated. You know, so that’s one of the big issues that you had to make sure you had all the money. If I give you a pack, you come back with all of that, you know what I’m sayin’?… But if you mess up any of my profit, you gettin’ a violation off top [automatically]…. Sometimes you would have some people that’d be jealous who wasn’t makin’ nothing. And those people who wasn’t makin’ nothing was the people who was pack-snatchers [laughing]. Like, if you hustlin’, you hide your stuff in the alley, somebody who wasn’t making nothing would go and try to steal your stuff. So when they steal it and they got caught, they got violated big-time for that…. You get a beat down head-to-toe, no cover-up, you know what I’m sayin’, no cover-up. So that was always—you was always gon’ get a pumpkin-head for that [or] an arm broken.48 You took something, you get that hand chopped off or you get shot for it.…

You had to be out there every day with us—during the wars, during the struggle, you know?… If [members] didn’t come to the blocks to participate and come to service [gang meetings] or something like that, that was a violation…. When the Brothers told you to go out there and take care of your business [perform acts of violence against the gang’s enemies], you had to do it. Or if you didn’t do it, your ass was gettin’ dealt with.

47 As described in footnote 2 above, Chicago gangs often refer to themselves as nations. Here, “Nation” refers specifically to the Mickey Cobra Nation, of which Roosevelt is a member. “Pack” refers to a package of drugs.
48 A pumpkin-head refers to a beating of such severity that the victim’s head swells up and becomes lumpy, thereby resembling a pumpkin.
So you always had to take care of your business. It wasn’t no hiding or none of that shit, ’cause we’ll have mu’fuckas lookin’ for your ass or waitin’ on you. So [if] you thought you was gettin’ away with some shit, you wasn’t.

For a number of reasons, however, these organizational arrangements ultimately could not be sustained, and, beginning around the turn of the century, Chicago’s black street organizations underwent a process of weakening that culminated in their eventual shattering. The following sections delineate this process of fundamental transformation.

Cracks in the Foundation: The Context and Beginnings of Organizational Decline

Two major, interrelated shifts in the wider context within which Chicago’s black street gangs existed around the turn of the century created the conditions for and initiated a process of organizational deterioration within these gangs. The first of these shifts involved the declining profitability of the city’s drug markets, particularly those on the city’s South Side. A number of factors contributed to this decline, perhaps the most salient of which was changing patterns in drug consumption. More specifically, by the turn of the century, the crack cocaine epidemic that had seized dispossessed urban communities across the United States beginning in the mid-1980s was in major decline, and marijuana had overwhelmingly become the drug of choice among urban drug users (see, for example, Contreras, 2013; Johnson, Golub, & Dunlap, 2000; Venkatesh, 2006; Zelenko, 2014). As children during the late 1980s and 1990s, study participants recalled growing up during the height of Chicago’s crack era. Indeed, a number of them reported that their mothers and fathers had been and, in some cases, continued to be addicted to crack cocaine. By the time most of them had become involved in their respective gangs, however, the market for crack had drastically diminished. In the quote below, for example, Cassius discusses the marked decline in consumer demand for crack cocaine since his childhood, pointing to the shift from open-air neighborhood drug markets to mobile, clientele-
specific sales practices as emblematic of this decline. Additionally, he contrasts the waning demand for crack with the enduring popularity of marijuana:

People sell crack, but these days, people work off they phone. They don’t just be outside talkin’ ’bout, “What’s up? Rocks and blow!” People work off they phone, so if you want some crack and shit, you gon’ call a mu’fucka like, “Bring me one down.”…

Like, the nineties? Naw. Hell naw! It was scorchin’ hot for crack. Now it’s, like, calmed down. It’s just the basic addicts every day who call the phone and shit…. But weed is—shit, I don’t think that’s never gon’ fade out, shit. If you smoke weed, you smoke weed…. Yeah, the weed is more popular. It’s more, like, a friendly-zone drug. So it’s a lot of more people do it.

The significance of this shifting pattern of urban drug consumption as it pertains to Chicago’s black street gangs primarily concerns the drastically-higher potential profitability associated with selling crack as compared to marijuana.49 This shift, then, had the effect of seriously diminishing the income of the city’s street gangs, whose revenues were derived primarily through illicit drug sales.50 As gang leaders struggled to maintain their own earnings, youthful gang members were increasingly marginalized within and even excluded entirely from their gangs’ drug selling operations. In short, drastically declining drug revenues combined with gangs’ corporate organizational structures, which funneled the bulk of earnings to gang leaders, meant that these gangs could no longer sustain their status as populist employers of their respective memberships—a status that they had most fully realized during the height of Chicago’s crack cocaine epidemic in the early 1990s (see Hagedorn, 2006; Venkatesh, 2006; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). The drug operations of Chicago’s street gangs, then, increasingly failed to ensure even basic subsistence for growing numbers of their members, many of whom

49 The relative intensity and brevity of the effects associated with smoking cocaine in crack form increases the drug’s potential profitability, as users can experience powerful drug cravings within minutes of initially consuming the drug. Moreover, manufacturing crack involves cutting cocaine with baking soda and other exceptionally cheap mixing agents, further enhancing its profitability.

50 See, in particular, Venkatesh (2006). The effects of the transition from a crack-based drug economy to a marijuana-based drug economy on Chicago’s gangs will be explored in further depth in the following chapter.
were left out of the business completely. Furthermore, opportunities for organizational mobility that had existed in previous decades and that constituted a common, if not universal, aspiration among gang members (see, for example, Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Padilla, 1992) had drastically diminished, often to the point of nonexistence. Despite these considerable shifts in the gang landscape, young gang members were still expected to conform to their organization’s leadership hierarchy and follow the directives of their superiors. Yet, the lack of even meager wages, diminishing avenues and aspirations of organizational mobility, and declining moral support from gang higher-ups severely weakened the control that gang leaders were able to exercise over their rank-and-file members. Terrence characterized these dynamics as follows:

They [older gang members] was gettin’ money, [but] they didn’t used to help us with nothing. They used to leave us out there stranded…. They wasn’t messin’ with us, they wasn’t talkin’ to us like that…. They didn’t give us no guidance, no nothing…. See, more of the older generation, they have more leadership. So they had a person tellin’ them, like, “Y’all can’t do that—we can’t do that.” More our generation, it’s no leadership.…

On the South Side of Chicago, it’s not too much drug dealin’ goin’ on…. When [the older generation] was doin’ they drug dealin’, it was on the decline, so they wasn’t makin’ as much money as the [generation before them]. So they couldn’t provide for us like they was provided for—like, people who had bought them drugs, guns, and all that. They couldn’t do that for us. ’Cause the lil money they made off [selling drugs] was just for them to survive.…

[When] we was in age about 14, 15, 16, we start gettin’ into it with them hard ’cause they wanted us to stop fightin’, stop gangbangin’ more. They was older than us, so they was more about money—gettin’ they money outside. We was younger, we was fightin’ every day, makin’ it hot [increasing police scrutiny], and they didn’t want—they didn’t like that…. They said we used to gangbang for no reason ’cause we wasn’t doin’ it for no money.

Further contributing to the declining profitability of Chicago’s drug markets was the wholesale demolition of the city’s public housing projects. These developments, overwhelmingly located in Chicago’s historic black ghetto neighborhoods, had long represented the city’s most lucrative, defensible, and contested drug markets (see Hagedorn, 2008; Popkin et
al., 2000; Venkatesh, 2000, 2006). The gang sets based in these projects, moreover, were often among the city’s most organized and powerful. The demolition of nearly all of Chicago’s public housing developments, then, not only served to eradicate many of the drug markets that had been the most profitable for the city’s street gangs, it also served to disrupt longstanding gang networks—the second major shift that contributed to the organizational deterioration of Chicago’s black street gangs. This disruption took place not only in terms of the dissolution of the gang sets that existed within the city’s housing projects, but also with respect to street gangs within the communities to which former public housing tenants were displaced. The arrival of thousands of gang members from demolished public housing developments into existing gang territories in Chicago’s black neighborhoods in the early years of the twenty-first century frequently led to violent clashes within these receiving communities.\(^{51}\) Yet, these transitions did not always—or at least did not permanently—result in violence, as many gang members from the projects were integrated into established gangs in receiving communities via existing relationships, increasing neighborly familiarity, or flat-out necessity. In the quote below, for example, Memphis discusses the dynamics of public housing demolition as they related to the city’s street gangs, particularly the violence and integration that occurred within receiving communities, as well as his interpretation of this demolition as a conspiracy to weaken the power and influence of gangs in the projects and disrupt the equilibrium in Chicago’s black neighborhoods.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{51}\) Despite political rhetoric describing the demolition of public housing in Chicago as a vehicle for racial and class integration, the majority of displaced project tenants moved into neighborhoods that were among the poorest and most racially segregated in the city (Oakley & Burchfield, 2009; Sink & Ceh, 2011). See Hagedorn and Rauch (2007) and Popkin et al. (2000) for insightful examinations of the gang violence caused by public housing demolition in Chicago.

\(^{52}\) While the politics surrounding the demolition of public housing in Chicago and cities throughout the country are varied and certainly cannot be reduced to weakening the power of street gangs, it is worth noting that Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes served as the headquarters for a 1995 political campaign featuring a notorious former gang leader (Donaldson, 1995).
It was *unity*. It was *structure* when them projects was up…. That’s exactly where it all started from: the buildings, B. Mu’fucks makin’ $100,000 a day, powerful niggas—every day, though, you know what I’m sayin’? Some niggas makin’ more than that…. But soon as the police started seein’ that, guess what they do? Cut they ass off. They feel like, “Damn, how the fuck could these certain amount of guys have so much power over all these youth?” And they can’t do it [the police wouldn’t allow it]. So they went and locked all the heavies [gang leaders] up, fuck it. Locked all the heavies up, you know what I’m sayin’…. [and] knocked the mu’fuckin’ buildings down.

[The former project residents] moved to different blocks…. And then the mu’fuckas from the projects, they came on that gangsta shit. They took over blocks, you know what I’m sayin’, from mu’fuckas who wasn’t never on shit [who weren’t tough enough] who had blocks. So then that’s how that shit became how it is now. The reasons the blocks—half of this shit because of the projects. The projects eight miles long! You think eight miles worth of mu’fuckas not gon’ move on these streets?…

[On the other hand, around] ’98, we was goin’ to Beethoven School—*bing*! Then, I’ll say we went to Beethoven for, like, a good year, then we met up with some more guys who was from the projects—you know, the projects still was up. So I met my man and them. Then [when families were being displaced from the projects in preparation for demolition] they came back here [to our block], ’cause we was always in the back yard. So we back here coolin’ and shit. Then, like, ’99, they came up with a name, you know, like, “Goodfellas. Fuck it, this what we gon’ be,” you know?

These dynamics stood in direct contrast to long-established street gang practices in Chicago. In previous decades, for example, gang members would often make efforts to avoid moving into neighborhoods or attending high schools dominated by an opposing gang. Indeed, under certain circumstances, it was difficult or even impossible for gang members to safely visit family members or friends in enemy territories. When moving into a neighborhood or school controlled by an enemy gang proved unavoidable, gang members were often forced to switch allegiances and align themselves with their former enemies for the sake of survival. Consider, for example, Lamont’s response when asked if the gang members in his neighborhood growing up were all members of the same street organization: “Yes, sir. No other way. If you was

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53 The infamous “State Street Corridor” to which Memphis was referring was home to more than four miles of nearly-uninterrupted public housing along South State Street between Cullerton Street and 54th Street. This strip included the now-demolished Harold Ickes, Robert Taylor, and Stateway Gardens developments, the renovated Dearborn Homes, and the Hilliard Homes, which have been converted into mixed-income senior housing.
anything else, you’d get the life beat out of you ’til you Black Stone [laughing]. Stone to the bone!” With the influx of thousands of gang members from public housing and as the structure of Chicago’s black street gangs weakening, however, in the early years of the twenty-first century the will and ability of these gangs to effectively regulate the composition of gang membership within their neighborhoods greatly diminished. Thus, gang members displaced from the projects as well as those simply moving across neighborhoods into areas dominated by rival gangs were increasingly able to—and did—retain their original gang identities, even as they were integrated into the gangs in their new neighborhoods.54 Contrast, for example, the quote from Lamont above, which referred to the period around the turn of the century, with Harold’s description of these dynamics as they existed in his neighborhood at the time of his interview:

Aw, yeah, [some of our guys are Gangster Disciples]. But since we grew up with ’em and they hang with us a lot, we show ’em love, we don’t never disrespect them…. We don’t treat ’em like no opp’ [opposition] ’cause they be with us, you know what I’m sayin”? We respect that…. We still kick it with ’em every day. Like, they our brothers, too….

It’s cool, we ain’t ask ’em to flip or nothing. Well, we asked them, but, you know…. If one flip, that’s cool. But if one don’t flip, that mean he true to it. Like, “Man, aw, he ain’t flip. Aw, OK, he with it, then.” Like, we gotta respect him, then. He a Gangster, that’s what it is, then….

The eradication of powerful project-based gang sets through the widespread demolition of public housing and the introduction of members from those gangs into existing gang territories throughout Chicago, however, was not the only factor contributing to the disruption of longstanding gang networks. As alluded to in the quote from Memphis above, the incarceration of increasing numbers of gang members and, especially, gang leaders also had the effect of weakening existing gang structures. In short, the convergence of the crack epidemic, Chicago gangs’ escalating involvement in illicit drug distribution, the focus of the nation’s War on Drugs

54 This dynamic is explored in greater detail in the next chapter.
on retail-level urban drug markets, and mandatory minimum prison terms and truth-in-sentencing policies meant that the city’s gang members were being arrested and incarcerated at unprecedented rates during the 1990s and facing increasingly lengthy prison sentences. The use of federal drug laws and organized crime statutes, moreover, moved growing numbers of gang leaders, including Chicago’s most powerful gang chiefs, out of Illinois’s state penitentiaries and into the federal prison system, drastically weakening their capacity to provide leadership and dictate and enforce policy to their respective memberships.\textsuperscript{55} Exacerbating these issues was the growing prevalence of snitching within these street organizations, as increasing numbers of gang members turned on their comrades in exchange for judicial lenience, further decimating the leadership ranks and eroding organizational cohesion.\textsuperscript{56} These dynamics created uncertainty on the streets, as younger members increasingly came to numerically dominate the street ranks due to the incarceration of their older counterparts, mechanisms of accountability broke down, and the climate began to shift from a collective—though exploitive and coercive—paradigm toward one that was increasingly and overtly individualistic and Spencerian. As Roosevelt explained:

> Over the time, people was gettin’ locked up for murders, \textit{[clearing his throat]} you know, and catchin’ cases—drugs cases and stuff like that. That’s what was slowin’ most of the guys down…. Couldn’t nobody eat ’cause the police was always comin’ through the block, shuttin’ the blocks down. People was snitchin’, tellin’ the police where we was hidin’ our stuff, where we was havin’ stash houses, everything. And, you know, once we found out who was doin’ all the snitchin’, them was the people who was gettin’ violated or who was dyin’….

> And then, over time, when most of the people got killed and was locked up, that’s when some of the structure was messin’ up. ’Cause people wasn’t around, so some of the people thought they can get away with doin’ things as far as steppin’ on other people turfs and goin’ out of bounds, you know? And doin’ things on they own without tellin’ nobody….\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} Although nearly all of the highest-ranking Chicago gang leaders gangs had been incarcerated since the 1970s, they had been able to maintain control and even enhance the power of their respective organizations from the confines of Illinois’s penal system up until the late 1990s (see Hagedorn, 2008, 2015; Jacobs, 1977; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Venkatesh & Leavitt, 2000).

\textsuperscript{56} See also Phillips (2012).
Once most of the guys got locked up and then when they come back to the streets, they seen that everything was changed. And most of the younger generation was doin’ things they way, you know? So they wasn’t try to hear what no old person was talkin’ about.

Gang leaders, however, were not only losing control at the local level within their neighborhood sets. With the transfer of many of Chicago’s most talented gang leaders to federal penal institutions, gangs increasingly lost their capacity to maintain organizational cohesion across neighborhoods. In particular, gangs increasingly lacked leaders who possessed the authority and legitimacy to mediate and settle disputes between their sets. These internal conflicts, then, whether based on money, power, or personal animosities, increasingly spun out of control and, in turn, fueled further organizational erosion (see also Hagedorn, 2015; N. Moore & Williams, 2011). Lamont, for example, whose description of the strong centralized leadership of the Black P. Stone Nation during his early days of gangbanging was quoted at length above, describes one such incident below. Although street justice appears to have been served in this instance, this justice—or, more accurately, vengeance—was not the byproduct of transparent organizational adjudication or even autocratic centralized authority, but, rather, was achieved through deceptive internecine power plays. As Lamont explained:

My first time I ever seen somebody get kidnapped was because of that [intraorganizational conflict]. So the town [gang set] that I spoke about was Blow Town. It was a Moe… by the name of Tone. Tone was a dope dealer. The Moe [Tone] went down there, him and one of the other Moes [from Blow Town] got into it. Tone slapped the Moe, said, “Nigga, you ain’t shit. You a bitch-ass nigga. Fuck you.” Smacked his ass like a bitch. [The guy who got slapped] went back and got his gun. Shot [Tone] three times in front of everybody—boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. A’ight? The Moe [Tone] died.

The General mad—the General who in my hood, [pounding his chest] he mad. You know, [Tone] come out of his ’hood, he raised him, been knowin’ him since he was a little boy, blessed him to bring him in and everything. So I’m like, “How they gon’ do

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57 The term Moe is used to refer to members of the Black P. Stone Nation. Derived from Moor, the expression is a remnant of the organization’s earlier affiliation with the Moorish Science Temple of America (see N. Moore & Williams, 2011).
it?” Because the guy who shot him, his uncle a General. So [he’s] sayin’, “Man, my uncle a General. Yeah, I popped his ass. [So what?] My uncle a General.” Tone—naw, his uncle ain’t a General, but the man who love him like a uncle a General, you see what I’m saying? So now it’s really, fuck them. You feel what I’m sayin’? So what they wind up doin’ was tellin’ ol’ boy uncle like, “Look, we just wanna holla at your nephew for a lil bit. We ain’t even gon’ kill him, murk him, nothing.”… His uncle told him, “Go down there. They ensured me you gon’ be OK.” He get down there. Mu’fucka get to talkin’ to him, they start whoopin’ him. Car pull up, they pick him up, put him in the trunk. Stomp him [stomping his foot], close the trunk, never see him again.

In summary, a number of shifts in the wider context within which Chicago’s street gangs existed served to drastically weaken the organizational structures and capacities of these gangs around the dawn of the millennium. The ways in which gang leaders and rank-and-file gang members interpreted and responded to these changes, moreover, often further exacerbated their corrosive effects. Overall, these developments set the stage for the popular revolution within Chicago’s black street organizations that followed.

**Things Fall Apart: The Delegitimation of Gang Leadership and Rank-and-File Rebellion**

Within this context, study participants and other young rank-and-file gang members began to call into question the structures and practices of their respective organizations and to reevaluate their position within these hierarchies. Most centrally, participants increasingly recognized the vertical structures of these organizations as essentially exploitative, with rank-and-file gang members selling drugs and committing acts of violence at the command of gang leaders who reaped an inordinate amount of the money and power derived from these activities. In the course of street-level drug selling and gang warfare, moreover, gang foot soldiers risked arrest and bodily harm on a regular—indeed, often daily—basis, while gang leaders assumed little risk in directing these activities from the safety of the suburbs or the distant confines of the state’s penitentiaries. In addition, as discussed earlier, the failure of gang soldiers to follow orders or meet expectations resulted in internal gang violations, or violent sanctions.
Although these dynamics had long characterized the workings of Chicago’s street gangs, rank-and-file gang members had generally accepted these conditions as an unalterable reality and held out hope that they might one day rise to power within their respective organizations (see Hagedorn, 2015; Leavitt & Venkatesh, 2000; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Padilla, 1992). As such opportunities evaporated, gang structures weakened, and the bloody gang wars of the 1990s wore on, however, gang members increasingly questioned these longstanding arrangements. Whatever financial support might have been available to incarcerated members or to those fighting criminal charges during earlier times of greater organizational profits, moreover, had largely disappeared, and gang members became increasingly disillusioned with the lack of material and social support they received from their gangs during periods of incarceration. In short, in the eyes of rank-and-file gang members, the leadership of Chicago’s black street organizations had been fundamentally delegitimized and the longstanding exploitive and coercive arrangements and practices that characterized these organizations were deemed intolerable. Consider the following quotes from James, Carlos, and Jabari, which illustrate the various dimensions of this emerging consciousness among youthful gang members:

**James:** A lot of niggas started to realize like, “What are you doing for me, for me to even listen to you? Are you providing for my household? Are you takin’ care of my kids or my girl if I get locked up? Is you bonding me out? Is you gon’ be there when I’m out there [on the front lines during gang wars]? No. And then we out here taking the most risk and you getting all the money…. Why should I even listen to what you tellin’ me? Why should I let you lead me, when I’m a born leader myself?… That’s over with.”

And then it just got to the point where, shit, they knew what we [the younger guys] was about, and they knew they couldn’t tell us shit.

**Carlos:** It’s the niggas that’s sittin’ in them big-ass cribs [houses] in the ’burbs that’s really runnin’ the ’hood, you feel me? And not even in the ’hood seein’ what’s goin’ on, but they callin’ shots: “Hey, man, go shoot that mu’fucka up.” Don’t give no fuck, you feel me? It’s crackin’ out there and we out there….
'Cause it’s like this, shit. It can be two months straight, big Folks [the gang leaders] ain’t even been out here. It been the lil Folks out here holdin’ this shit down. So when big Folks and them pull up tryin’ to organize some shit, Folks and them be like, “This our shit now,” you feel me? “Y’all still from right here, but we got shit poppin’ right now. It’s our turn to get it crackin’ out here.” So it could be an altercation in the mob, shit. And if you feelin’ some type of way, like I said, every man for theyself out here right now, you feel me? Used to be structure and all that shit, but you your own man out here. If Folks wanna go pop big Folks, then that’s what Folks finna do—he finna go lay Folks down, shit.

**Jabari:** You ain’t gon’ let nobody hit you in your mouth for something that you didn’t really do—that you made a mistake. That’s just like—OK, I go on a hit. I supposed to killed him, but I shot him and missed him, though—ain’t hit nothing. “You ain’t hit nothing? You gotta get violated.” “Damn, that’s my first time shootin’ a gun. So you gon’ hit me in my mouth? I ain’t ask you to go shoot that—y’all told me to do that.” You feel me? That’s how it be. So you might not like that, and you gon’ hit him [the leader] in his mouth.…

Because now it’s like, OK, “Yeah, you the big guys. When we was little, you could do that—you could do whatever you wanted. You could treat us like that. Yeah, we scared of y’all. But now we older.” Now we like, “Man, we grown, too. You ain’t just finna slap me or do nothing to me. I’m a do it to you first!”…

Then dude[s] just come out of jail—know everything about everything—come to you and tell you, “Man, you gotta do [things] this way. You gotta abide by these rules and policies.” And you might not like some of these rules and policies. You like, “This what I gotta do?” “Yeah, or we gon’ have to violate you,” or something. You not gon’ go. You not gon’ honor that. You gon’ be like, “Fuck these rules. Fuck this structure. Who is you? I don’t even know you.” That’s how you gon’ be… [The older guys] get locked up, come home, [there are] new faces on the block. Then you thinkin’ this still your block, whole time, it’s something different.

As these passages reveal, young rank-and-file members of Chicago’s black street gangs increasingly assumed a position of resistance to what they perceived as the exploitive and oppressive conditions within their respective organizations. This resistance generally took the form of verbal and physical challenges to longstanding organizational arrangements and customs and often resulted in violent clashes with gang leaders who were loath to relinquish their power and authority. Consider, for example, the passage below, in which Rasheed describes a physical altercation between himself and an older gang leader in the neighborhood where both he and
Lamont grew up. The contrast between the dynamics described by Rasheed and those described earlier in the chapter by Lamont—only five years Rasheed’s senior—as he recounted his early days of gangbanging are striking and serve as a clear illustration of the tremendous shifts in gang dynamics explored in this chapter. That the altercation described below occurred in a Black P. Stone stronghold long known for its durable organizational structure, and as a result of a situation in which Rasheed openly admitted he was at fault, further reveals the ubiquity and enormity of these changes.

Me and one of the lil homies, we had did some foul shit, I ain’t even gon’ lie.… We did some cutthroat shit.… We had hit a mu’fucka pockets [robbed someone], know what I’m sayin’? He wasn’t from our block, but he was Stone, though, and he lived on our block. He ain’t really have shit, [but] it’s like, we basically just violated the man in so many words ’cause we hit his pockets and shit, made him feel uncomfortable in the hood, you feel me?… Even though we was masked up and some more shit, he knew what was goin’ on.…

So after we robbed him, he come walk straight into the hallway with one of the big homies while we in there chillin’. So that shit was awkward as hell, know what I’m sayin’? [The guy we robbed was] like, “These two right here.” They like, “Ah, y’all out of order,” woo-wop-the-bam.… [The big homie] always cussin’ us out, though, know what I’m sayin’?… And he drunk. I’m like, “Bro, didn’t you just tell us earlier, ‘Fuck us?’” He like, “Yes, sir, I said, ‘Fuck y’all!’” I’m like, “Fuck what you talkin’ ’bout, then! We ain’t tryin’ to hear that shit. You can go ahead and save that shit for somebody else.” He like, “What you mean, ‘Fuck what I’m talkin’ ’bout?’ This is my building.” He get to power trip now. You know me, I’m, shit: “What?  Man, this is my building.” On Chief,58 he rushed me—like, swift, know what I’m sayin’? I ain’t even know he could move that fast. He rushed me, hands around my neck. I’m shocked! I’m gettin’ loose [wrestling imaginary hands off his neck]. I ain’t gon’ lie—I hope you don’t think I’m lyin’ ’cause we havin’ this interview or whatever…. I whooped big homie ass, you hear me! I patched him up—psh, psh, psh [slamming his fists into his palms]. On Chief! He ain’t hit me not one time. He ain’t get not one punch. He just choked me up, and it was over from there.…

Whole time, the building that we in, his girl stay up in the building. And then that’s damn-near where all of us be meetin’ up at. We be shootin’ dice in the hallway and shit. So we right up in the building the next morning. He walk past me, say some slick shit, know what I’m sayin’? I steal on [punch] Moe ass—bing! ’Cause he was on some “it ain’t over” shit, anyway…. So, shit, I’m on that shit, too! I ain’t gon’ let you steal on me first…. So he walk past, say some stupid shit to me, I steal on his ass—bing, bing, bing!

58 A reference to Jeff Fort, a.k.a. Chief Malik, the co-founder and longtime Chief of the Black P. Stone Nation.
Likewise, Kevin recalled witnessing a strikingly similar altercation between his older brother and a gang leader over claims of ownership and control of their neighborhood during his early adolescence. Although the gang leader was ostensibly able to reassert his authority in this particular situation, he was ultimately powerless to stop the erosion of the neighborhood’s gang structure which, by the time of Kevin’s interview, was characterized as “completely out the window.”

One of the old heads had did some shit to my brother…. He was a older mu’fucka…. about 30, 34, 35…. He was the man of the block, I guess. And my bro said, “This ain’t your block.” You know, shit went from there…. I was in the store. I just come out, [the] nigga hittin’ my brother with a bat. They get to fightin’. He beatin’ my brother up and shit…. Mu’fuckas just sittin’ there watchin’, you know, lettin’ him do that shit to my brother. That shit pissed me off. Mu’fuckas wasn’t doin’ nothing—my own cousins wasn’t doing nothing. Then I damn-near start crying and shit. I’m: “These niggas fake as hell. Niggas be doin’ all this talkin’ like they on something, but when shit happen, mu’fuckas don’t wanna do nothing.”…

[My other brother] was locked up at the time. He was just about to get out when the shit happened…. [When my brother got out] they was ridin’, tryin’ to catch his ass…. He locked up [now], so, shit, we gon’ wait for him when he get out.

The resistance efforts of youthful gang members, however, involved not only defiance in the face of gang leaders’ attempts to dominate them, but also challenges to the economic inequalities that defined the structural arrangements of Chicago’s corporate-style street organizations. One strategy that participants discussed, for example, involved young gang members intentionally failing to repay gang leaders for drugs that they were given on consignment. As a relatively older member who had achieved a degree of success in his gang’s drug business and parlayed that success into a budding career as a self-employed barber, Roosevelt explained his frustrations with having to deal with such situations:

My cousin, he was cuttin’ hair—he always been a barber. So I seen him doin’ it. And that was fast money—that was makin’ more money than drug dealers. And the drug dealers was gettin’ they hair cut. So I seen them gettin’ they hair cut, so I’m like, OK, look, I’m finna do this. ’Cause if they payin’ big money to get they hair cut, they wanna
go out every week lookin’ good, I could make faster money than sellin’ drugs. It’s easier to me…. Less risk [of] goin’ to jail and everything…. So that’s why I left it alone. Like, I ain’t gotta touch no more street drugs. And then I invested my money into bein’ more powerful for myself, you know what I’m sayin’, buyin’ my own guns, my own work [drugs]….

And the guys who’s out there that is sellin’ drugs, I give them some money so they can sell drugs to flip and bring me a profit back…. I’ll take my money and give it to them, and we’ll flip it [laughing], so I won’t have to go out there and do it. I just use my head and be smart. Like, look, I ain’t gotta do it. Somebody else want that job….  

I had a couple of issues where somebody—a few of them tried to get over on me. Yeah, I did have some issues, I’m ’a be real with that. ’Cause people think they can be slick and run off with your money thinkin’ I don’t need it, which I do. And that’s a real issue. So that’s when they’ll get they ass fucked up, shit. Don’t play with my money, you know what I’m sayin”?…. Some of the lil homies that I fronted something to. I probably fronted, like, $1,000 worth [of] some kush [high-grade marijuana] or something, and he ain’t bring my money back. So we had to go find his ass and fuck him up.

Yet, it was precisely the type of arrangement described by Roosevelt above that participants and other young gang members increasingly took issue with—that is, rank-and-file gang members having to assume all of the risk involved in retail drug distribution while absentee gang leaders reaped the lion’s share of the profits. The erosion of gang leaders’ ability to control their ranks, moreover, increasingly emboldened young gang members to subvert these arrangements. In short, young gang members increasingly—and, in general, correctly—doubted the ability of older gang leaders to punish such transgressions. As Rasheed put it, “They old—they ain’t movin’ no muscle.” Weezy explained these dynamics more generally from the perspective of the rank-and-file as follows:

Most of the older guys, they don’t really fuck with us no more, you know, ’cause they fronted us weed, gave us shit, and we ain’t never bring them shit back, you know? ’Cause, shit, man, they ain’t out here with us. They somewhere with they family and stuff, but they wanna claim something, you know? I don’t know how you could ever claim something but you not out there.

Another, more aggressive form of economic resistance described by participants involved robbing older gang leaders outright. Like failing to repay money they earned from selling drugs
they received on consignment, many young gang members viewed such robberies as, at the very least, an acceptable byproduct of the cutthroat capitalist dynamics established by gang leaders themselves if not a fully-justified form of redistributive economics. Perhaps even more than other forms of rank-and-file resistance, the potential for severe violence in these incidents was particularly high. In the passage below, for example, Carlos describes the robbery-murder of a flashy, well-paid gang leader at the hands of members of his own gang. As the man killed was Carlos’s mentor, he attributes this particular incident to the “jealousy” of the soldiers who took his mentor out. Nonetheless, these dynamics reveal the truth in Carlos’s statement, quoted earlier, about rank-and-file rebelliousness in the face of exploitive leadership and flagrant inequality on the streets, where he concluded: “You your own man out here. If Folks wanna go pop big Folks, then that’s what Folks finna do—he finna go lay Folks down, shit.”

Dolla was a get-money nigga…. Like, bro was one of them niggas out here [a powerful gang leader], you feel me, but he was GD, though. He showed me everything, so he the reason why I’m like this now [profit-minded]. Shit, he had everything a nigga wanted, you feel me?… He wasn’t one of them niggas that sit on the corner with the lil Folks—naw. He don’t play games. He a grown man. But he was about that money, and some niggas in the mob got him, you know, the homies…. That shit deep, boy….

I don’t really wanna speak on they situation or nothing, ’cause some niggas that’s still in jail right now [for] 40, 45 years for that situation that’s goin’ on in that whole lil mob right there. But it was jealousy, you feel me? Like, everybody was gettin’ money, but some had more than others. And, I guess, it was sometimes when he [Dolla] can do something you couldn’t do at the time. You got three thou’ in this pocket, but he walkin’ around with 20 thou’. You got seven thou’, he got 30 thou’, you feel me? You just can’t even win in his boat right now. You spend that seven, shit, you over with. He spend 10, he ain’t done. He keep goin’. So a lot of mu’fuckas be wantin’ that lifestyle, G. That’s really what it is.

In some cases, participants described disputes between young gang members and gang leaders as leading to the wholesale splintering of neighborhood sets and to wars between the resulting factions. These divisions were often the manifestation of pervasive intergenerational hostilities within a set, although, in some instances, deepening rifts between a few individuals
eventually forced all members to choose sides between the quarreling factions.\footnote{Another cause of splintering was the growing inability of gang leaders to maintain formal cohesion within sets with relatively large memberships and geographic territories. Under such circumstances, these sets might split into two or more factions yet maintain friendly relations.} Under these circumstances, loyalties might be determined by not only generational allegiances, but also by personal relationships and, within larger sets, geographic considerations. Nonetheless, in all cases, the resulting dissolution of these gangs illustrates the intensifying crisis of legitimacy faced by gang leaders and their inability to effectively resolve internal discord (see also Hagedorn, 2015; N. Moore & Williams, 2011). Below, for example, Aaron details the sequence of events that led to the splintering of his neighborhood gang and the resultant war between the gang’s younger and older members:

It been a couple of shootings and shit over some shit like that [intergenerational conflicts]. Like, man, younger niggas and older niggas gettin’ shot from shootin’ at each other type shit—robbin’ each other…. [They all from the] same ’hood. That’s why it’s a war now between the two sides, you feel me?…

A couple of years [ago], one of the big homies got killed, and they was sayin’ it was another one of the guys’ fault. But it really wasn’t his fault…. It was some other niggas—some other opps that had caught him [the big homie] at the liquor store. But the reason they was sayin’ it was his fault is ’cause some shit about the niggas had wanted him or some shit, that’s why [the big homie] had got killed. But [the other big homies] was tryin’ to make it like they was mad or some shit. So he like, “Aw, you mad, and you wanna tell everybody it’s my fault.”… So him and one of the lil homies, they had robbed [the big homie]. They robbed him for some loud [high-potency marijuana] or some shit—took that shit…. and was like, “Man, you lucky we ain’t kill you.”… So that’s what all started the feud between the two sides.…

But it’s more than that lil story. Mu’fucka got into it with some niggas off 103rd [Street]. We had got into it with some niggas over there, and they felt like one of the older heads was supplyin’ them with guns…. So they caught him over there in the ’hood, and they killed him…. Some of the lil homies killed one of the older homies, yup. So that’s what really started the feud. Once he died, that’s what started the gang-on-gang shit…. Mu’fuckas just got to choosin’ sides from there—who you gon’ be with? Either you rockin’ with them niggas or you not, shit….
At its most potent, the resistance of rank-and-file gang members to their gangs’ autocratic organizational structures coalesced in the formation of a new identity explicitly rooted in such resistance. This generally took the form of adding titles such as Outlaw, Insane, or Renegade in front of the name of one’s street organization, for example, Outlaw Gangster Disciple or Renegade Black P. Stone. In so doing, gang members were able to maintain their original gang identities while repudiating the unjust arrangements and coercive practices that commonly characterized these organizations. These renegade factions, then, generally—though not always—constituted themselves as categorical enemies of the street organization from which they broke away. At the very least, a central element of such renegade identities involved a willingness, if not an outright desire, to engage members of the renegade’s original organization in violence. This has been a particularly common practice among disgruntled members of the Gangster Disciples, long Chicago’s largest and most corporatized street organization, with rebellious factions developing during the organization’s 1990s peak (see Popkin et al., 2000). More recently, however, these renegade identities have been adopted by members from a wide variety of the city’s black and Latino street gangs (see also Hagedorn, 2015; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Ralph, 2010, 2014). Cassius and Jabari described the psychology behind the development of renegade gang factions and the practical implications of renegade identities within the context of Chicago gang culture as follows:

**Cassius:** Well, shit, the Outlaws, they ain’t really got no Board of Directors. So they ain’t really got nobody who lay the game plan for mu’fuckas. They really do what they wanna do, the Outlaws…. They branched off from the original Gangsters and made theyself the Outlaw Gangsters…. They wanted they own, you know, set of laws or—which they don’t have *[laughing]*. So, shit. So yeah, they wanted to do things on they own.

**Jabari:** Everybody renegadin’ it, throwing up L’s and I’s and shit…. I, that’s Insane. I got that *[tattooed]* on my neck. We Insane Gangsters—IGD…. We the same [as
traditional Gangster Disciples], but an Insane GD will get into it with other Gangsters. Like, I get into it with other Gangsters, that’s why I’m Insane GD.…

You can be Insane anything—it’s renegades. Just like L’s. Like, if I go to the joint and I’m yellin’ “Insane,” the GDs gon’ beat my ass. ’Cause they: “Leave that shit in the world.” When you come on the deck, it’s all Folks—it’s Larry [Hoover’s] guys. On my mama—seven, four, fourteen.⁶⁰ I be like, “Fuck that, I’m Insane!” They gon’—“What? Take him to the back. Matter of fact, get him off the deck. Whoop him—send him to ATG.” I keep fightin’, I keep fightin’, I’m ‘a go to ATG—against the grain [a segregated unit]. That’s where I’m ‘a have to be. And that’s where all the L’s and them niggas be. That’s how the County [Cook County Jail] rockin’ right now—ATG. Everybody ATG in there.

The internal rebellions waged by young gang soldiers against coercive and exploitive gang leaders ultimately proved successful, and gang leaders lost control of the organizations they had long ruled with an iron fist. This breakdown in gang leadership and organizational structure transformed the fundamental nature of Chicago’s black street gangs. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new chapter in Chicago’s gang history was clearly afoot.

**Summary and Discussion**

Around the dawn of the millennium, the convergence of a number of major sociohistorical developments served to weaken the organizational structures and capacities of Chicago’s African American, corporate-style street organizations (see also Hagedorn, 2015; Hagedorn & Rauch, 2007; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Ralph, 2010, 2014).⁶¹ These developments included: the declining popularity of crack cocaine, the economic lifeblood of the city’s black gangs; the demolition of the city’s public housing projects, these gangs’ most profitable drug markets and, in many cases, their organizational strongholds; the displacement of project-based gang members into existing, often enemy, gang territories in Chicago’s other black

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⁶⁰ Seven, four, fourteen is the numerical representation of GDN, the acronym for the Gangster Disciple Nation.

⁶¹ These works explore various facets of the processes explored in this chapter as well as the analysis presented in the following chapter. Thus, a discussion about the ways in which the findings from the present study relate to those described in the studies cited here will be reserved for the discussion section at the conclusion of the next chapter.
neighborhoods; and the use of federal drug and organized crime statutes to move gang leaders from state to federal correctional facilities, effectively eliminating their ability to maintain oversight of their organizations. In turn, study participants and other young gang members were increasingly excluded from their organizations’ drug operations, as gang leaders and more established members sought to maintain their own salaries amidst declining revenues. This created tensions between young gang members and older gang leaders, who continued to demand loyalty and obedience from their youthful followers despite no longer being able to offer them the basic economic opportunities that had once served as a cornerstone of gang membership. These gangs were also increasingly unable to regulate gang membership at the local level, as displaced gang members from the projects moved into existing gang neighborhoods throughout the city’s black neighborhoods where they developed and/or strengthened relationships with members of enemy gangs. In the face of harsh federal prison sentences, moreover, growing numbers of gang members turned on their gangs in exchange for judicial lenience, further weakening organizational cohesion. When internal tensions flared up, then, those gang leaders who had not been removed from circulation via incarceration in federal prison increasingly lacked the legitimacy and power to settle these disputes, which, in turn, were often left to fester, exacerbating organizational corrosion.

Under these conditions, many of the study participants and the city’s other rank-and-file gang members increasingly came to recognize their gangs’ organizational arrangements and practices as inherently coercive and exploitive. As even the limited opportunities for gang mobility that had existed during the 1990s and previous decades effectively evaporated, moreover, these young gang members accurately interpreted their marginal positions within these organizations as increasingly permanent. The dissonance between their gangs’ appeals to
collective identity and interests and the realities of highly-stratified organizational arrangements and coercive and exploitive leadership strategies had come into sharp focus. Young people who had joined gangs as a way of resisting the experiences of marginalization, insecurity, and domination that accompanied their status as black youth from the ghetto came to find their experiences within these gangs as similarly oppressive. Within this context, youthful members of Chicago’s black street organizations assumed positions of resistance against powerful gang leaders, who, in their eyes, had lost their legitimacy. These young gang rebels waged revolutionary campaigns against these leaders, refusing to follow orders, challenging claims to authority, violently opposing violations, subverting inequitable economic arrangements, robbing well-off gang leaders, and fashioning new resistance identities. These rebellions were not sudden, and they unfolded at different times and speeds and in different ways from gang to gang; nonetheless, the broader contextual factors that drove these dynamics affected all of the street organizations and local sets to which study participants belonged, and internal resistance movements were likewise ubiquitous.

Theoretically, the analysis presented in this chapter makes a case for understanding street gangs as dynamic, historical phenomena. Gangs, in other words, exist within history, possess histories of their own, and are, thus, prone to transformations over time. Accurate and holistic understandings of these groups, therefore, must include an analysis of the particularities of the sociohistorical context within which they are embedded at any given time and place, the histories of the particular groups in question, and the intersection of these histories (see also Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2006, 2008, 2015; Hughes, 2006; Levenson, 2013; Ralph, 2010; Venkatesh, 2003; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). Similarly, the findings in this chapter demonstrate that processes and identities of gang resistance are also dynamic and historically contingent (Castells,
Indeed, it was the transformation of resistance among young gang members that led to the internal rebellions that brought about the shattering of Chicago’s black street organizations. More precisely, the development of these campaigns of resistance was inextricably linked to major shifts in the sociohistorical landscape at the dawn of the millennium that served to weaken the capacity of these gangs and further marginalize their youthful rank-and-file members. As their positions within their gangs deteriorated, what might be understood as a new form of critical consciousness was awakened within these young gang soldiers, who began to recognize the hypocritical and oppressive nature of the structures and practices of the gangs to which they belonged. It was this *conscientização* (Freire, 1970/2000), or the emergence of a new critical consciousness, that necessarily preceded the struggles of young gang members to transform these gangs and their adoption of new resistance identities that spoke to their embrace of this new consciousness. Ironically, these rebellions were fueled by the same impulse of resistance that compelled participants into these gangs to begin with.

Although it is probably too much of a stretch to frame the populist campaigns of resistance waged by young gang members as even a limited approximation of the project identity described by Castells (2010), the historical dynamism of gang resistance and *conscientização* has important implications for addressing gangs and violence that will be discussed in Chapter 8. The case for understanding street gangs more generally as dynamic and historical phenomena, however, will be taken up and expanded upon in the following chapter.
VI. FINDINGS: FROM STREET ORGANIZATIONS TO CLIQUES: A NEW CHAPTER IN CHICAGO GANG HISTORY

The popular revolutions within Chicago’s African American street organizations explored in the last chapter effectively eradicated the leadership structures and organizational arrangements that had distinguished these gangs during the 1990s and, to a lesser extent, for the 20–30 years prior. In the wake of these rebellions, the city’s youthful gang members forged a radically new form of street gang, largely refashioned in direct contrast to the street organizations that they supplanted. Clearly, these uprisings were undertaken with the intent of fundamentally transforming the nature of these gangs. Their success to that end sets them apart from the vast majority of armed revolutions throughout the world, which overwhelmingly establish new systems of governance that ultimately replicate the type of systematic repression and coercion they were designed to eliminate (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Mattaini, 2013).

The following chapter describes Chicago’s newly-reconstituted African American street gangs, in particular their organizational configurations and leadership structures, their collective ideologies and bases for solidarity, issues related to collective and personal identity, and their involvement in drug dealing. The ways in which these gang characteristics and dynamics diverge from those that predominated during the 1990s will also be emphasized.

Overall, the findings presented below signify a radically new chapter in Chicago’s gang history characterized by the transformation of the city’s gangs from street organizations to cliques. As a chronological extension of the study findings presented in the previous chapter, this analysis expounds on that chapter’s concluding remarks in making a case for historicizing gang research.
From Autocracy to Autonomy: Gang Form and Function in the Twenty-First Century

Gang leaders in Chicago spent decades building their gangs into cross-neighborhood street organizations/nations, through the use of strategic diplomacy, mutually beneficial alliances, and sheer force. The local branches, or sets, of these gang nations fell under the jurisdiction of their centralized organizational leadership hierarchies, which wielded autocratic power in dictating gang policy, enforcing discipline, conferring promotions, and controlling gang warfare. The internal gang rebellions explored in the previous chapter, however, put an end to these longstanding arrangements, freeing neighborhood sets from this often coercive and exploitative control and restoring autonomy at the local level. Indeed, study participants were unequivocal in declaring that their gangs operated independently and governed themselves and that the days of external oversight and authority had ended. Lacking legitimate centralized leadership, moreover, formalized coordination between local sets has all but disappeared, as gangs have retreated into the comfort of what they are best able to understand and manage—their immediate neighborhoods. Further, many larger and less geographically concentrated neighborhood sets, which had often boasted dozens of members, have split into two or three or four independent gangs, each with as few as a handful of members. Such heightened gang insularity and diminished organizational complexity has made once-essential divisions of labor unnecessary, pushing women further toward the margins of these gangs and leaving little room for members beyond their mid-twenties. In the following passage, Marco sheds light on many of these dynamics:

62 Sometimes these newly-splintered gangs remained on cordial terms; at other times, these divisions were either driven be internal animosities (see Aaron’s account in the previous chapter on page 117). In still other cases, such animosities emerged at some point following a split (see the discussion below on pages 137–139).
63 Although street gangs have always been dominated by young men (Klein, 1995; Thrasher, 1927), the organizational complexity and institutionalized nature of street gangs in Chicago has traditionally allowed for more explicit and integral roles for women and members of a relatively wide range of ages (Fishman, 1995; Hagedorn, 2008; Ralph, 2014; Venkatesh, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2006).
It ain’t a lot [of us]. Like, a’ight, it’s me [pausing]… the ones that’s out of jail, man, it’s me, my homie, Harold, bro right there, Scoop, Elton, Lu-Lu. Now—and, uh, who else could I say? Jay, Zeke, and Weezy…. The youngest was Fella. He just died, though. He was out there with us every day. He turned 16 and died—got shot three weeks later. He was the youngest. But right now, the youngest, his name Scoop, he still 17. And the oldest is probably, like, 25. That’s, like, the main guys…. But it’s guys who [are] locked up, you know?… They come home next year, though. But that’s what it go from—like, 17 to 25….

We govern ourself. Everybody [every gang is] independent…. Everybody do they own thing. Only time I see them [members of other Black Disciples sets] is at funerals…. My block, that’s our world, you feel me?… So it’s all 16 [friendly] between us [the different BD sets], you know, like, “Oh, what’s up, bro?” “Yeah, what’s up?” Woo, woo, woo. But them dudes down there ain’t bro right there [motioning in the direction of the next room, where his friend is waiting], you know?… [The bond is] stronger between us, though. That’s why you hear people say, “We all we got,” or, “It’s just us,” or stuff like that—“OTF: only the family.” That means, like, only us, you know? That’s how it really is, though. That’s why it’s a lot of division in the streets. However, not only have the centralized leadership hierarchies of Chicago’s black street gangs been eradicated; young gang members have done away with all formal positions of gang leadership, even those at the neighborhood level. In place of these rigid chains of command, the city’s youthful African American gang members have established egalitarian arrangements based on a delicate balance of collectivist ideals, mutual respect, and personal autonomy. These classless arrangements represent an unmistakable repudiation of the vertical organizational structures that characterized Chicago’s street gangs for decades as well as the ideologies, codified in each gangs’ respective “literature,” that had legitimized them.64 The city’s young gang rebels clearly were not interested in replacing their gangs’ deposed leaders and assuming their autocratic power, but in transforming the fundamental nature of their gangs. The battles they waged against former gang leaders, then, were not about ownership, power, or control; they were about the rejection of conventional and oppressive gang ideologies rooted in these values and the promotion of new ideologies founded on egalitarianism and autonomy. The use of

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64 See the discussion on pages 98–101.
“violations,” physical beatings long employed by gang leaders as a means of coercion and discipline—and perhaps the most egregious manifestation of their supremacy—has been effectively abolished. Indeed, participants made it clear that the type of authority necessary to order and carry out violations no longer existed within their gangs in any form. Below, Carlos and Montrelle offer insights into the democratization of Chicago’s black street gangs and the ways in which current gang dynamics contrast from those of past eras:

**Carlos:** It’s just a mutual respect now, you feel me? Like, it ain’t no—you still got the old heads out here, you know what I’m sayin’, the big Folks…. [but] it ain’t no chief or no kings or none of that shit no more…. Naw, it ain’t like that no more, like in the nineties and shit. Man, hell naw, ain’t no nigga a chief this, he prince—naw, it ain’t like that no more, you feel me? Everybody for they own, G…. [There] used to be structure and all that shit, but you your own man out here.

**Montrelle:** We usually come together and talk and weigh out the pros and cons of things. You know, so it’s mainly mutual decisions…. Certain people got more influence than others because certain people been around longer and survived more…. but there’s no set leaders or anything. We all together…. [A particular member] may be the man on the block ’cause he might got this amount of money or he may have did this and that, but at the same time he just like the rest of us, you know what I’m sayin’? So, basically, it’s a mutual decision with everybody—with them too.

Although participants often talked about their gangs as having “no structure,” these egalitarian organizational arrangements do not simply reflect an inevitable abolition of internal gang stratification, passively accepted by youthful gang members in the wake of their successful rebellions. Rather, they reveal the adoption of radically new ideologies among young African American gang members in Chicago. The intentionality and the revolutionary nature of these new ideologies are apparent in the way that the city’s street gangs are now socializing incoming members. Under the guise of collectivistic rhetoric and symbolism, gang socialization during previous decades stressed unquestioned obedience to an autocratic, coercive, and exploitive chain of command. In direct contrast, the socialization of new gang members today emphasizes ideals of equality and autonomy alongside traditional gang principles like collectivism and
loyalty. Incoming gang members are also encouraged to consciously and vigorously resist the types of autocratic domination that pervaded the city’s gangs during the 1990s. In practical terms, this means that established gang members in their late teens and twenties are telling the 13- and 14-year-old youngsters in their neighborhoods who are just “jumping off the porch” that they are their “own man out here” and that they should not let anyone—not even the older members themselves—exploit them, bully them, or otherwise tell them what to do. In contrast to previous chapters in Chicago gang history, these ideologies are consistent with the actual practices of the city’s current street gangs and, as such, can also be understood as behavioral prescriptions for their members. Consider the quote from Zeke below, in which he explains the ideologies of autonomy and resistance with which his fellow gang members socialized him. Note the congruence between these values, his description of expectations for member behavior, and the internal group processes and organizational arrangements within his gang.

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All of us got say-so…. All of us—like, you know how the clique have that one big homie? All of us big homies. We make our own decisions, you know? Like how they be tellin’ me, like, “Don’t let nobody send you off [take advantage of or manipulate you]. If you don’t—if your gut tellin’ you ‘no,’ listen to your gut. Don’t let nobody make you be a sendoff or nothing like that. Listen to what your mind tellin’ you. If you think it’s not right to do it, don’t do it. If you think it’s right, well go on ’head.” You know, and stuff like that.
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Only one study participant, Marco, described an official position of leadership within his gang that was recognized as legitimate in the eyes of its current members. Unlike positions of gang leadership in previous eras, however, this position was purely symbolic and did not involve formal authority or concrete benefits of any kind. In other words, the position represented an honor the gang bestowed upon one of its own, as opposed to a promotion or a formalization of conferred power or authority. Indeed, that none of the other three members of Marco’s gang who were interviewed for the study even mentioned this position of leadership at all—despite all
being asked questions about gang leadership and organizational hierarchy—seems to suggest the honorary and intimate nature of the position. In contrast to the top-down approach to gang leadership development in the 1990s, moreover, in which gang leaders autocratically wielded the power of promotion,65 the leadership position described by Marco was voted on democratically by all of his gang’s active members. In fact, in spite of the existence of this position of leadership, Marco and other members of his gang espoused perhaps the most coherent and consistent ideologies of autonomy, democracy, and resistance of all study participants. As Marco explains:

On our block, ain’t no “big I’s” and “little you’s,” you know? All our opinion count…. ’Cause you one of my brothers, you know? So that’s the only type of thing…. Like, when they was havin’ a vote to who gon’ have the block, you know, it’s called First-D—that’s First Demetrius. It’s a old term for it, but that’s what it’s called—First-D—who got the block and shit…. [The First Demetrius is], like, the one who gon’—basically, the face of it, you feel me, the face of the block. Like, ’cause ain’t nothing different, though. The face of the block, you the one who gon’ say, “Hey, man, we gon’ have a meeting on Sunday.” That’s all he do, you feel me?…

My homie, Rillo, he’s one of the older guys. He been with the shit since he was 13, you feel me, he been gangbangin’ hard since he was 13…. He said, “Man, I’m finna give the block up…. Y’all have a vote.” You know? So it’s just like that…. We had a vote.

I told Folks and them from the gate, “I don’t care, Folk, ’cause ain’t no big I’s and little you’s. ’Cause what I got to say gon’ get around regardless of who got the block.” You know? I think bro and other lil bro voted for me. A lot of the guys voted on my homie, Elton. But my homie, Jay, ended up gettin’ the block anyway, you know, he had more hands raised. I don’t really care about that type of stuff; you feel me?

Even in Lamont and Rasheed’s neighborhood, where the local Black P. Stones have had a reputation for maintaining their organizational hierarchy, the power of former gang leaders over younger members today is nearly nonexistent. Many of these older individuals, perhaps recognizing their waning influence with (much less control over) younger gang members, have transitioned into jobs with local community agencies and grassroots organizations. Lamont, who

65 See, for example, the quote from Lamont on page 99.
had also been able to parlay his experiences and reputation as a gang member into a job with a local nonprofit organization, described these dynamics as follows:

How has it [the gang dynamics in the neighborhood] changed? It’s no structure. It’s no leadership…. The structure in my ’hood amongst the older men is still there. Amongst young people like me, it’s not. It’s a lot of people dead, it’s a lot of disloyalty, it’s a lot of people that turned state’s [evidence] on cases, you know, things of that nature. But as far as that older group of people who were around for the original piece, they’re still around, they’re still active, they’re still involved in the community. Their outlook is different. They’re not pushin’ drugs—they’re pushin’ jobs, they’re pushin’ education, they’re empowering youth. They’re doin’ what they should have been doin’ from the jump [beginning], but except they were young men at that time, and [the streets] had them swallowed up.

This transformation from gang leader to youth advocate and community worker has conceivably allowed former gang leaders to maintain, to some extent, a well-defined role within the neighborhood that carries some degree of esteem. While such efforts by one-time gang leaders were generally respected and, in some ways, even admired by current gang members, Rasheed emphasized the generational disconnect described by his older counterpart, Lamont, above and made it clear that current gang members in his neighborhood were taking no orders from these “old heads.” The flattening of the gang’s organizational structure and the effects of new processes of gang socialization are also apparent in his statements below.

Now, it’s like, “Fuck what they [the old leaders] said, [whether] I’m right or wrong,” you feel me? So if a mu’fucka bogus, they bogus, so it ain’t really about what the old heads say. It’s about who gon’ say something when shit get out of order, know what I’m sayin’? ’Cause they old. What can they—they ain’t movin’ no muscle, you feel me? So it’s really up to the mu’fuckas around my age, lil bit older, to keep shit tightened up, you feel me, make sure the younger guys stay on point…. [One of the guys who brought me into the gang,] he a crucial brother, know what I’m sayin’? He like, “Man, don’t let a mu’fucka trick you. Don’t let a mu’fucka go on you [discipline you].” woo-wop-the-bam…. He basically lettin’ a mu’fucka know like, “You can’t be waitin’ on no one,” know what I’m sayin’? He the first one who put it in our head like, “We the law. Can’t wait on the old heads to call the shit. Shit out of order, we gotta handle the shit.”...

’Cause they [the former leaders] don’t got no relationship with them [the young members], know what I’m sayin’?… Everybody be in they own cliques—even the older

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66 These themes will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 8.
mu’fuckas got they own cliques that they fuck with… The older heads might rap with ’em every now and then, but that shit probably go right in one ear and out the other. I’m kickin’ it with these lil niggas [on a regular basis] so they lookin’ at me eye-to-eye, know what I’m sayin’? I’m just a couple years older than they are…

But, shit, it’s still like…. we ain’t tellin’ a mu’fucka to do nothing…. I think they be listenin’, but they still do what the fuck they wanna do, just like we was doin’ what the fuck we wanted to do, know what I’m saying? I just hope they listen for [their own benefit].

Alongside the eradication of centralized and local leadership hierarchies and the establishment of egalitarianism and autonomy as essential ideologies, the increasing importance that young gang members place on personal relationships, alluded to by Rasheed in the quote above, represents another radically new dimension in the evolution of Chicago’s black street gangs. Indeed, this development has contributed not only to the further reorganization of the internal dynamics of these gangs, but has also fundamentally transformed intergang dynamics in the city, as well. The nature and implications of this trend are explored in the following section.

The Primacy of Personal Relationships and the Declining Significance of Organizational Affiliation

Perhaps an even more revolutionary development than the eradication of centralized and local gang leadership hierarchies has been the declining significance of traditional gang affiliations—that is, identification with a street organization, such as the Gangster Disciples or Mickey Cobras—in shaping the nature of relationships among gang members on Chicago’s streets. Indeed, as discussed briefly in the previous chapter, gang members are openly forging alliances and even formally unifying with members of longtime rival street organizations.67 These practices, generally referred to as “cliquing-up,” are taking place both between the now-

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independent neighborhood sets described in the previous section as well as within these sets. In other words, not only are sets with rival gang affiliations developing informal cross-neighborhood alliances, but individual sets themselves—which gang members now often refer to as cliques—are increasingly comprised of members with various organizational affiliations. Jabari succinctly described this new form of gang as follows: “A clique is a group of people who don’t represent the same organization, but they form an organization. Do that sound better? Yup, that’s a clique. You a Gangster, I’m a Stone, he BD. We all together.” Table 3 below specifies the current organizational makeup of participants’ gangs and reveals the near-ubiquity of such intergang unifications.

As Table III indicates, only two of the ten gangs to which participants belonged consisted of members who all shared the same organizational affiliation. Clearly, such affiliations no longer function as the incontrovertible—and, as will be explored below, generally not even the principal—basis for association among Chicago gang members. Like the eradication of gang leadership hierarchies and the establishment of indigenous and egalitarian forms of internal gang governance described above, the declining significance of organizational affiliation represents a radical departure from the city’s fundamental gang customs and a fierce rejection of traditional gang doctrines by young gang members. These gang members generally view the city’s decades-old, ideological gang rivalries with disdain and openly flout these conventional antagonisms by building alliances across once-unassailable gang lines. Participants’ rejection of ideological gangbanging is apparent in the quotes from Carlos and Rasheed below, in which they characterize this tradition as impractical “bullshit” and as a form of divisive “segregation,” respectively. The authority to build relationships across gang lines, moreover, is simply taken

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68 Cliquing-up refers to both the unification of members from different street organizations within the same gang as well as the development of informal alliances between such gangs.
TABLE III
ORGANIZATIONAL MAKEUP OF PARTICIPANT GANGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Street Organizations Represented in Gang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montrelle, Terrence, Rick</td>
<td>Mickey Cobras, Black Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durrell, Memphis, Kevin</td>
<td><strong>Black Disciples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt, Cassius</td>
<td>Mickey Cobras, Outlaw Gangster Disciples, Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont, Rasheed</td>
<td><strong>Black P. Stones</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold, Marco, Weezy, Zeke</td>
<td><strong>Black Disciples</strong>, Gangster Disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jabari, James</td>
<td><strong>Gangster Disciples</strong>, Insane Gangster Disciples, Black Disciples, Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td><strong>Black Disciples</strong>, Gangster Disciples, Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortez</td>
<td><strong>Gangster Disciples</strong>, Black P. Stones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Gangster Disciples, Black Disciples, Black P. Stones, Vice Lords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td><strong>Black P. Stones</strong>, Black Disciples, Gangster Disciples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Bolded names of street organizations indicate numerical and/or symbolic predominance within a particular gang. Where no street organization is bolded, no one organizational affiliation predominates.

For granted in these statements and, thus, can be understood as a manifestation of the emphasis on individual autonomy among contemporary gangs in Chicago. In other words, gang members today have embraced the notion that the ability to dictate relationships on the streets rests solely with individual gang members themselves, as opposed to being contingent upon traditional gang affiliations.

**Carlos:** It’s a lot of renegade shit goin’ on—a lot of bar-none shit goin’ on out here in the field right now, so it really ain’t even mu’fuckas goin’ by them laws, you feel me?… It’s just really who you know. Like I say, it ain’t even about, “Oh, I’m a Stone, he a Lord, and he a Gangster.” Or, “He Folks, and he” such-and-such [a member of another gang]. It ain’t even like that no more. It’s really, “Is you tryin’ to get to this money or you on
some bullshit?” You know what I’m sayin’? It’s really common sense out here now, you feel me?… I fuck with everybody [regardless of organizational affiliation], man.

**Rasheed:** I don’t really give a fuck what a mu’fucka is [what street organization someone identifies with]…. Real fuck with real, so at the end of the day, that gangbangin’ shit, that shit really all fucked up, know what I’m sayin’? That’s segregation. That shit real—that segregation shit real, B. They segregated us with that shit, know what I’m sayin’?⁶⁹…

It’s other people that we know that’s something else [in other gangs]…. Everybody got they friends that might come to the block who ain’t Stone and shit. Like, my homie who locked up right now for the hit that I could’ve been on, he was GD, know what I’m sayin’?

In place of organizational affiliation, personal relationships have become the primary foundation upon which associations are shaped within and between Chicago’s street gangs. Along with the rejection of traditional gang ideologies and the increasing centrality of autonomy among the city’s youthful gang members, this radical shift has been driven by a number of interrelated factors. As described in the previous section, street gangs in Chicago have become more insular, shunning the type of high-level city and prison gang politics that characterized the city’s gangland during the war-torn 1990s and shifting their focus toward local concerns. Accordingly, the loyalties of current gang members no longer lie with the defunct cross-neighborhood street organizations—which many of them helped destroy—but, rather, with their immediate comrades with whom they share close personal relationships and much of their daily lives. The near-wholesale demolition of Chicago’s public housing developments, moreover, discussed in the last chapter, has meant that these comrades are increasingly likely to identify as members of different—and, often, ostensibly rival—street organizations. More specifically, as thousands of project-based gang members were displaced into gang territories throughout the

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⁶⁹ It’s unclear who Rasheed is referring to here when he says “they.” There appear to be two likely possibilities. One is that he is referring to gang leaders who used divisive gang ideologies to maintain control of their members. The other possibility is that he is referring to the political power structure, which cultivated divisions within marginalized communities of color as a means of thwarting unity and subduing insurgent political power.
city’s black neighborhoods, contact and familiarity between members of longtime rivals gangs rose drastically. The waning influence of traditional gang ideologies, moreover, meant that young gang members were increasingly amenable to building relationships across gang lines. Eventually, shared experiences in the streets served to cement these intergang bonds. In the following passages, Harold and Aaron expound on these dynamics.

**Harold:** It go off sets now, you know? It could be BDs, GDs, they just together ’cause they off that same block. That’s how it be now…. People stay on they block and they just get to kickin’ it and then they respect them as them bein’ that gang. So it’s like, we gon’ just call ourself—or somebody get killed, they’ll just name it after that person. And if you knew that person, but you a different gang, you [are going to be] with them, too. You just call it a set, you know what I’m sayin’? Like, I’m from Tre World—we call ourself Tre World [named after a member named Tre who was killed by the police]. We BDs, but, you know, it might be some GDs that’s messin’ with us—that’s cool with us, you know what I’m sayin’, that’s already been with us, though…. Back in the day, it was just straight—y’all all BDs, y’all all GDs, woo, woo, woo, all Stones. But now it’s cliques…. Basically, who you with and what set you be at. Where you be—yup, what clique.

**Aaron:** Man, it ain’t no structure. It’s gang-on-gang shit [violence], really. It’s just neighborhoods. Mu’fucka claim that gang shit, but it’s all about your neighborhood—where you from. Like, fuck, it’s Terror Town, O-Block [infamous South Side gang neighborhoods], all that. That’s what the fuck it is. It ain’t no GD, BD, shit like that. That’s all it is, basically: where the fuck you grew up at and who you with. You know, ’cause, shit, it’s, like I said, it’s GDs, BDs in our ’hood, it was Moes…. and the Vice Lords, shit…. We cool with some Fours [Four Corner Hustlers, too]. I’m cool with anybody who about money, man, and ain’t about no bullshit. [Anybody who] ain’t causing no danger to me and my daughter, I’m cool with anybody, shit.

The supplanting of traditional gang allegiances with a new paradigm of loyalty rooted in individual autonomy and personal relationships has thrown Chicago’s streets into a type of disarray not seen since the tumultuous early days of African American and Latino gang organizing in the 1960s. As gang loyalties that had endured for decades have been called into question—where they have not dissolved or imploded—gang members have had to negotiate new alliances. These dynamics have often given rise to conflicting expectations and loyalties, forcing gang members to make difficult choices and leading to intragang violence. This process
of allegiance renegotiation, thus, had further contributed to the splintering of Chicago’s traditional gang structures. In the following passage, for example, Terrence explains the violent process by which his set of Mickey Cobras fractured. The salience of personal relationships, the declining importance of organizational affiliation, and the resistance of young gang members to the control of older gang leaders are all apparent in his account below.

It’s not no gang of GDs that I’m cool with, but as far as specific person, yeah, I have GD friends. And they don’t bother me—they cool! With me, it’s not really about what gang you is, it’s more of how the person you is that makes me dislike you. That was the problem with us and the MCs, too, 'cause we associate ourself with more of the BDs. Like M-Squad, Goodfellas, D-Mob, KPB. That’s who we associate ourself—them the people we hang with. And the MCs didn’t like that. And we didn’t care….

Basically, [that’s] the story of how we got into it with Bang City. Like, I was cool with most of them [pausing]… majority of them [pausing]… cool with all of ’em!… The whole Indiana all the way back to Federal, [during] my [older] brother era, all them was together. They grew up together…. They older guys is our older guys…. They was the gang—they was the MCs. We MC, but as we growin’ up, it got segregated. Like, our older guys, they was still messin’ with certain people down there. But as we grew up [clapping his hands], we wasn’t goin’ down there talkin’ to them like that. We stayed on our side—from Indiana to, like, Wabash, [and] they stayed on they side. That’s when it started separatin’ like that between our neighborhood.…

Certain people didn’t get along with them [Bang City—the other side of the neighborhood]. You know, Montrelle, Black, [both Black Disciples,] they didn’t get along with ’em…. Man, it put me in a bad predicament at first 'cause [clapping his hands] I was still goin’ to MC meetings and all that. So, basically, all the attention was fallin’ on me. After a while, I just stopped caring.... [The older MCs] started givin’ Bang City guns [clapping his hands]. And, basically, they givin’ them guns to shoot at us…. That left me with a choice—I have to pick sides. I’ve been knowin’ Black and Montrelle [clapping his hands] almost all my life, so [I sided with them]....

So I don’t like nobody [any of the MCs] now. I don’t talk to none of them—none of the older guys. I don’t talk to nobody but my crowd I know…. And we actually into it with them [the older MCs], too. Like, we shoot at them, too.

Yet, even as gang members have rejected traditional alliances based on common organizational affiliations and united with conventional enemies on the basis of locality and personal relationships, the legacy of Chicago’s black street organizations remains deeply
embedded in the fabric of the city’s gang culture. Remarkably, present-day gang members, including the study participants, have not abandoned their traditional street organization identities as Black Disciples, Mickey Cobras, Gangster Disciples, and Black P. Stones, among others.\footnote{Weezy was the only participant who identified with a neighborhood gang but did not identify with one of these traditional street organizations. However, this was due to the fact that he had had what he described as a “sheltered” childhood and did not become involved with the streets until the relatively advanced age of 18; this was not due to an abandonment of a previous organizational identity.} Even those who were too young to remember, much less have taken part in, the days when these street organizations truly existed as such have adopted these identities, a practice that continues unabated among emerging gang members today. Given the reorganization of Chicago’s gangs as independent neighborhood-based collectives, it would have been easy and, seemingly, rational for gang members to simply discard these old identities and assume new, exclusively neighborhood-based gang identities. Instead, gang members have retained these organizational identities even as they have refashioned identities and allegiances rooted in locality. Clearly, association with these traditional street organizations remains an essential form of identity among the city’s gang members.

The nature and implications of this identity, however, are drastically different today than during previous decades. Specifically, identifying with one of these organizations no longer entails “gang membership” in the conventional sense of the term, as, for all intents and purposes, these organizations no longer exist—certainly not as cross-neighborhood gang nations and, increasingly, not even as homogeneous neighborhood sets. Instead of serving as a basis for formalizing and sustaining collective ideologies and bonds, then, traditional gang identities are now viewed in largely individual terms, as gang members draw on them in fashioning their personal identities, styles, and ideologies. The adoption of renegade gang identities and the rare instances in which a gang member “flips” and changes their organizational identity entirely push
this individualistic paradigm to even further lengths. In previous eras, these practices were
treated as treasonous defections; today, they are regarded as a logical extension of personal
autonomy and a legitimate form of individual identity construction. Consider the cases of James
and Jabari, who hailed from the same block in the midst of one of the Gangster Disciples’ largest
traditional strongholds. The shattering of the gang’s organizational structure had fractured their
sizable neighborhood set into a number of independent factions. Tensions between some of
these now-independent sets festered below a façade of phony smiles and duplicitous handshakes
before eventually bubbling over into open internecine warfare.71 These dynamics created
something of an identity crisis for James and Jabari. The respective ways in which they resolved
this crisis reveal both the continued significance of traditional gang identities as well as the
contemporary emphasis on autonomy and individuality in the construction of these identities.
For his part, Jabari adopted a renegade identity as an Insane Gangster Disciple. This constituted
a reportedly unremarkable decision in the eyes of his comrades, most of whom, nonetheless,
chose to maintain their traditional identities as Gangster Disciples. For James, on the other hand,
the infighting and betrayals in the neighborhood fueled intense feelings of uncertainty and
distrust that eventually colored his views of not only his clique’s ostensible allies from adjacent
blocks, but of some of his closest comrades, as well. Following a reflective period of
incarceration, he resolved to leverage his recently-forged relationships with a number of Black P.
Stones, the Gangster Disciples’ oldest and fiercest rivals, to “flip Black Stone.” He explained his
decision as follows:

I was a Gangster at first. I flipped Black Stone, you know what I’m sayin’, ’cause I
wasn’t really rockin’ with the guys like that no more. And all the older niggas I fuck
with, we just fuck with each other on money-wise, so really that gangbangin’ shit didn’t
really come into hand with them, you feel me? But as far as that, I couldn’t ’cause I told

71 It was unclear whether these tensions had existed beforehand and had simply been kept in check by the strength of
the gang’s organizational structure or if they had emerged only after its collapse.
myself I couldn’t see myself saying, “I’m one of the guys shaking your hand, shakin’ up with you, and kickin’ it with you outside, parlaying with you, knowin’ that I’d kill you. Knowing that me and you got—we done had bad words and knowing that certain situations that got took so far to the point where, like, ‘Shit, nigga, I’m a kill you. You a man like I’m a man, but I’m a kill you first.’” You feel me, because I done seen shit—the guy robbed the guys, the guys done killed the guys…. in the same mob—organization. So, shit, I don’t want to be a part of that. I can’t say you my homie if I know he gon’ kill me down the line if I do something he don’t like or we come across each other on bad terms, you know what I’m sayin’?

[People are] always, sneak dissin’, how we call it, and talk behind your back. You see, it’s too much. I can’t say that you my homie if I got to watch you all the time. If I can’t trust you with my life or trust you to tell you a secret and know you gon’ keep it, I can’t be around you. I can’t really trust you. And I can’t even say we in a clique together or we from the same ‘hood, if I can’t really say I trust him—that he would ride or die for me….

I’m still in the same area, [but] I also be in different areas ’cause by me being Black Stone. Other than that, it’s still cool. I know niggas don’t like what I did when I did flip, but niggas ain’t gonna do nothing. ’Cause they know who I am, so they ain’t gonna do nothing. They know what I can do.

Although driven by a similar desire to alter his Gangster Disciple identity within the context of organizational implosion and internecine warfare, James’s conversion to the Black P. Stones was interpreted among his comrades as a repudiation of this identity, whereas Jabari’s adoption of the “Insane” identity was viewed as a less-offensive modification. Yet, in spite of defying popular sentiment among his peers on the block, James’s decision was ultimately regarded by these peers as an acceptable expression of personal autonomy and individual identity construction. The Stones that James joined up with were not enemies of his original block, and as long as he did not formally denounce his original block, his Gangster Disciple peers would tolerate his conversion. Indeed, as Jabari expresses below, he even believed that this transition would ultimately prove beneficial for his friend—that being a Stone would “help him be better as a man.”

Bro just left. Like, he ain’t talk to nobody. He talked to me, but he was locked up. And then I’m like, “Man, you ain’t even gotta do that shit, bro. Niggas is gon’ look at you
It ain’t like we gon’ love you different, just respect out of a man. Like, people on the street look at that shit.”… It’s just certain shit you don’t do. He ain’t have to do that, though.…

He just felt like, “Man, I don’t wanna be Gangster no more. I’ll kill one of them Folks.” “Nah, bro. What you think you doin’ now? You was just Gangster and you was just beatin’ up the Folks. What you mean? It’s the same thing, it’s just these are our guys we know.” And that’s why he was probably gettin’ so heated like, “Damn, bro, this is my mans. I’m thinkin’ crazy now. Fuck ’em.”… “But still, them niggas ain’t never did nothing to you. At the end of the day, them niggas gon’ kill somebody for you. At the end of the day, nigga, this is the hood you servin’ [selling drugs] in. You could’ve been on Maryland.” Bro is from Maryland, you feel me, he came up here [to our neighborhood]…

And he flipped strong. He fuckin’ with some niggas who was Stonin’ it. Shit, he like how them Moes move, I guess… But he good, though. I feel like the Moes gon’ help him be better as a man. Folks really wasn’t teaching him nothing. And that’s right ’cause the Moes do—like, some of the Moes will sit there with you and guide you through this shit. Folks like, “A’ight, huh—go do your thing.” That’s how they is. “Huh—go do your thing. Come back when you done.” “Damn, you ain’t even just show me how to use the mu’fucka or to bag the mu’fucka up. You just gave me this and say you want this back, and ‘Huh, do your thing.’ What the fuck?” A Moe gon’ sit you down, show you how to do it, show you how to do this and that, tell you how to be about it, be smart, woo, woo, woo. You know, they really brotherhood-ing it. We the Folks, you feel me? Like, it sound rugged. It sound just bad and grimy—the Folks…

They [the other guys on the block] took it as, “Shit, oh well. James, he Stone? Oh well…. He cool with us, shit, he still Rico World,” woo, woo, woo, you feel me? Long as he ain’t turn his whole back on us, like, he just gave us the [sticking up his middle finger]—you know? Long as he ain’t turn his whole back and walk out the door, he straight…. But, see, this the thing when you a clique now—see, we went from a mob to a clique, right? If this was back when we was little—I’m 21—if this was back when we was like, let’s say 15, 14, 16, he would have got his head knocked off. Like, they would’ve pumpkin-headed him, for real. That’s what the GDs do—pumpkin heads. They’ll take you to the back and beat your head ’til your shit literally look like Halloween. On my mama.

While young gang members have fundamentally refashioned Chicago’s gang landscape in their image, democratizing and localizing governance, emphasizing autonomy and personal relationships, and rejecting traditional gang ideologies and divisions, external forces have also had enormous effects on the city’s modern street gangs. Perhaps most notably, the declining urban drug economy, discussed in the previous chapter as a chief contributing factor in the
weakening and eventual shattering of Chicago’s street organizations, has continued to shape the city’s gangs in the early twenty-first century. These dynamics will be explored in the following section.

**On (Not) Getting By in the Marijuana-Based Drug Economy**

The previous chapter explored the catastrophic effects that, in conjunction with a number of other major historical events, the waning demand for crack cocaine had on Chicago’s corporate-style, outlaw capitalist black street organizations at the dawn of the millennium. For many young rank-and-file gang members, shrinking drug revenues meant that they were increasingly marginalized within their gangs’ drug-selling operations or even excluded from them entirely. The emergence of the less-profitable marijuana as the drug of choice among urban drug consumers during this period and its persistence as such into the present day has only exacerbated this dynamic. Thus, while selling drugs represented the focal point of gang life in Chicago during the 1990s, the findings from this study emphatically indicate that, in the early twenty-first century, this is no longer the case. Indeed, more than one-third of the 20 study participants either made no mention of selling drugs at all during their interviews or discussed the topic only to highlight its declining significance within their communities and gangs. Few participants, moreover, described selling any drug aside from marijuana. In short, the low levels of profitability associated with the marijuana-based drug economy has left increasing numbers of gang members without even the most basic opportunities for income generation in the underground economy. Their marginalization in the formal economy, in other words, now increasingly characterizes their experiences within the underground economy, as well. The

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73 One participant discussed selling heroin, and at least one talked about selling crack in a general, but not explicitly personal, sense. A few participants did not specify the particular drug(s) they sold.
74 See also Hagedorn (2015).
inability to earn money selling drugs has made basic survival increasingly difficult for many Chicago gang members, who are all but formally barred from conventional employment opportunities and whose families are overwhelmingly poor.\textsuperscript{75} Below, for example, Memphis, the only member of his gang actively selling drugs,\textsuperscript{76} describes the bleak realities facing his peers as a result of these dynamics as well as their desperate and escapist responses:

Like, right now—OK, you just seen [like, 10 guys on the block].\textsuperscript{77} And who you think hustlin’?… Me. Out of 10 niggas! This what I’m sayin’, everybody else just out there. It’s just a typical day. And they only out there ’cause ain’t no mu’fucka wanna be in no crib [house]! They ain’t got no job, and a mu’fucka ain’t got no money, so they just out there. Why you think everybody tryin’ to jump on this [interview]? They broke—everybody broke. You know what I’m sayin’?… A typical day [guys are thinking]…. “Aw, man, what I need to do today? Damn. What type of stain I can hit [caper can I pull]?” You know what I’m sayin’, anything to get some money. That’s the first mu’fuckin’ thing: “A’ight, fuck it, I’m ‘a go hit the block.” You know what I’m sayin’? Now that’s when mu’fuckas gotta get robbed or now you gotta put yourself in a situation….

Most niggas wake up every day broke, tryin’ to find a high, B. You know, that’s fucked up, but it’s the truth. Niggas tryin’ to find that high. Niggas don’t even try to find a way to put they life in a better situation. Niggas would rather: “Fuck it, man. Wake up, get me five, 10 dollars, fuckin’ smoke this loud [high-potency marijuana], look dumb for a couple hours, and be broke.” You ain’t even buy yourself a fuckin’ meal to eat! I’m sayin’ this ’cause I witness—I done did this shit a couple of times, you know what I’m sayin’? I done grew out the shit now, but it’s fucked up that I know that’s what’s goin’ on…. After you brought up in something for so long, you know, you gon’ become condemned to shit. You gon’ fall right in line with however the usual routine you been doin’ every day.

Those participants who did report selling drugs, moreover, admitted that their earnings from these activities were generally far below a basic subsistence wage. Even during the height of the crack epidemic, when the earnings potential for retail-level drug dealers was likely at its

\textsuperscript{75} See Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, our interview was interrupted several times as Memphis fielded phone calls from a friend whom he left in charge of selling his drugs while he completed his interview.
\textsuperscript{77} I had been hanging out on the street with a group of guys and pulling those individuals who wanted to participate in the study aside to conduct interviews.
peak, the wages of these dealers was barely equivalent to the legal minimum wage.\textsuperscript{78} Marijuana’s displacement of crack, then, has only served to further erode these meager earnings. As described in the quote from Memphis above, moreover, gang members often turn to drug use as a means of coping with their everyday experiences of marginality and desperation.\textsuperscript{79} The fact that many gang members also smoke marijuana themselves, therefore, sends what small profit margins they might enjoy from their drug sales, quite literally, up in smoke. In practical terms, even those participants who reported selling drugs had difficulty earning enough money to ensure that they were able to feed themselves, get high every day, and occasionally purchase a new pair of shoes or an outfit. Of the 20 study participants, for example, only Lamont and Cortez owned a car at the time of their interview, and neither had acquired their car using money they earned selling drugs: Lamont had been able to purchase a car with money he earned from his job with a nonprofit organization, and Cortez’s working-class parents had bought him a car. In short, although selling drugs was never very lucrative for the vast majority of Chicago gang members, the conditions on the city’s streets today have intensified this harsh reality. In the quote below, for example, James explains the near impossibility of effectively sustaining oneself as a street-level marijuana dealer:

It’s a slight struggle, because you gotta understand that you buyin’ this and you might be—say if you buyin’ weed. OK, I’m finna buy a zip [an ounce] for $300, you know? I’m finna bag up $550, so I’m finna bag up 55 bags—all sawbucks [$10 bags of marijuana for resale]. So I just spent $300. And I smoke weed, so now I’m finna smoke at least, by the time I been done sold the whole thing, if I ain’t got a good line [a high demand], I done smoked $100 worth already. So now I’m goin’ back to the store [mid-level drug supplier] with my $300, ’cause I’m puttin’ $150 up [saving $150]. But, really, I ain’t even put $150 up ’cause I’m smoking, so that mean I gotta buy Swishers [Swisher

\textsuperscript{78} Taking into account the high risk of incarceration, work stoppages related to conflicts over markets, and violent injury or death related to working as a street-level drug dealer, moreover, often made these positions even less profitable than minimum wage work in the formal economy (see Bourgois, 1995; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000).

\textsuperscript{79} As discussed in the following chapter, the traumas associated with participants’ experiences of violence, both in their families and on the streets, also contributes to their use of substances as a coping mechanism.
Sweet cigarillos].

And they two for a dollar or seventy-five cents [each]. So that’s another $30 gone. You know, and I’m smokin’ cigarettes and now they, what, $12.75 a pack, $13 a pack… And that depends on how many packs I go through a day. Then I’m buyin’ food all day ’cause I’m high and I’m hungry. Then I gotta pay my phone bill, it’s $50 a month, you know?

So, really, it be hard to maintain… because also you got to understand that a lot of niggas don’t know how to manage they money. So a lot of niggas don’t know how to save money. They could save something, but they can’t save everything. Or, like, instead of you buyin’ food, go to somebody house you cool with, eat at they house, or have a lil chick make you something to eat, you feel me? And just save more money to pay your phone bill and go back to the store. ’Cause you still gotta buy the weed, you gotta buy sandwich bags, you gotta buy a scale to weigh your weed, make sure they gave you the exact amount—the right amount for your money’s worth. All that. It’s a lot [of hassle], man. It’s a lot.

Furthermore, the eradication of the organizational hierarchies of Chicago’s black street organizations has made opportunities for mobility in the drug business all but nonexistent for the average Chicago gang member. As such, the few opportunities for drug business promotions that exist today are no longer attainable via traditional standards for advancement, such as “putting in work” for the gang as an effective salesperson or obedient soldier or being the beneficiary of internal gang politics. Instead, mobility in the drug game is increasingly dependent upon key personal, often familial, relationships with individuals in prominent positions within drug distribution networks—networks that are no longer synonymous with the city’s street gangs. In the quote below, for example, Carlos describes the opportunities afforded him through his father’s position as a drug distributor at least a couple of layers removed from the streets. In addition, Carlos underscores the scarceness of such opportunities, the lack of street-level influence of former gang leaders like his father, and the persistence of the drug trade as a highly-stratified and fundamentally exploitive business.

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It is common practice among urban marijuana users to smoke marijuana in cigarillos whose original contents have been emptied out and replaced with marijuana. These are typically referred to as “blunts,” the namesake of a popular variety of cigarillo within the urban milieu manufactured by the brand Phillies.
Shit, when you get to politickin’, that’s when you find out what’s goin’ on and who is who and who know who, you know what I’m sayin’?… That shit be for real. You politic with the right mu’fucka, man, you can get plugged into who knows what out here, you feel me?… Just off the simple fact who you plugged with and who you related to out here. If you plugged in with a mu’fucka that’s really callin’ the shots… man, you gon’ be good out here…. It’s still kings out here in the streets, but they old, though. So they ain’t really tryin’ to conduct shit [organize young gang members] ’cause the young niggas don’t really wanna hear ’em….

My daddy, he one of the big—he one of them niggas out here…. I don’t even stay in the ’hood. Like, I rarely go to the ’hood now. [I go,] like, three days out the week. Just off the simple fact I ain’t got to no more, you feel me? I’m good—I’m just chillin’, shit. I don’t really be doin’ too much of nothing no more. I be in the field, though, but it ain’t me—“Oh, I gotta work this pack [sell drugs at retail level]. If the opp’s slide through, I’m clappin’ shit [shooting them].” I ain’t gotta do that no more, you feel me?…

It’s a saying. I don’t know if it’s the full saying, but, like… it’s people that do shit, and some people that [shit] gets done to them. I’m one of the people that benefit from the shit that’s gettin’ done, you feel me? I might not be the person that’s doin’ it, but I get beneficial off that shit that’s happenin’.

As Carlos alluded to above, access to opportunities for advancement and the chance to make even decent money in the drug game are increasingly rare for African American gang members in Chicago and are often based on factors beyond their control. The study participants, in the throes of the desperate, continuous struggle for daily subsistence associated with selling—or, even worse, not selling—marijuana at the retail level, were acutely aware of this reality. Participants harbored no illusions about the fallacy of “fast money” so often linked to gangs and drugs in the public imagination and popular discourse. The ambitions of gang and drug mobility described by Roosevelt and Lamont in reference to their days as budding gang members at the turn of the century have given way to the sober recognition among participants that gangbanging and selling drugs no longer constitute a viable career path. Given the lack of profitability and nearly nonexistent potential for mobility associated with selling drugs in

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81 With familial connections to Central American drug cartels and positions as large-scale wholesale distributors in Chicago and, perhaps, beyond, the city’s Latino gangs appear to be on a fundamentally different trajectory than its black gangs (see Hagedorn, 2015).
present-day Chicago, the continued participation of the city’s gang members can only be understood within the broader context of acute un- and underemployment experienced by the city’s black youth.\textsuperscript{82} In other words, although the economic benefits of gang membership are, in general, extremely limited, exclusion from even the worst-paying jobs in the formal economy increases the attractiveness of these relatively meager benefits enormously.\textsuperscript{83} When presented with opportunities for conventional employment, no matter how menial and precarious, participants reported that they and their peers took advantage of such opportunities virtually without exception: the “guaranteed check” associated with standard employment was preferable to the insufficiency and instability of “hustling.” Consider, for example, the excerpt below, in which Marco describes the retirement of Rillo, the former First Demetrius in his neighborhood, which prompted the vote for his replacement described in the passage on page 128. The most venerated member of his gang, Rillo left the streets behind at age 25 for what was, in all likelihood, a minimum-wage, dead-end job at a local corner store:

Folks been workin’ in the store around the ’hood, you know, Folks couldn’t really be out here all like that…. He didn’t feel like doin’ this shit no more because, I guess, he gettin’ that age, and he feel like this shit is stupid. Last time I tried to talk to him about something like, “Hey, Folks, why are we…” He: “Man, listen. You said opp’s? Man, I don’t give a fuck about that shit.” That’s all he would say. He was with Jay recently, though. He [told Jay]: “Man, I don’t care about that shit.” So I stopped talkin’ to Folks about what we got goin’ on ’cause [if] you don’t care, I ain’t finna tell you, you feel me? So we just been holdin’ it down and shit.

The dearth of prospects for mobility in the drug game, and in the underground economy more generally, has likely contributed to the adoption and maintenance of egalitarian gang governance over the last decade or so. While rank-and-file gang members during the 1990s had

\textsuperscript{82} To repeat the statistics cited in the Study Participants in Context section of Chapter 3, the unemployment rate in Chicago for working-age African American teenagers is nearly 90\% and more than 50\% for those in their early twenties (Ross & Svajlenka, 2016).
\textsuperscript{83} See Chapter 4.
only slightly better odds than their contemporary counterparts of actually making a living in the
drug business, the gang hierarchies of that period provided the illusion of such possibilities of
ascendence. Indeed, the erosion of this illusion, resulting from the increasing marginalization of
young members in their gangs’ drug-selling operations, was among the chief factors that brought
about the internal rebellions that shattered these gang hierarchies in the first place. Nearly all
gang members in Chicago today are stuck “petty hustling” in an attempt to fulfill their
fundamental needs and basic desires—food, bus and train fare, cigarettes, marijuana, and the
occasional new outfit. The recognition by present-day gang members that there are very few, if
any, tangible opportunities for advancement in the underground economy has made autonomy
and egalitarianism attractive alternatives to the gang hierarchies of previous eras; within a
context of permanent and ubiquitous marginality, hierarchies make little sense.

Summary and Discussion

As the findings presented in this chapter reveal, African American street gangs in
Chicago are fundamentally different today than they were less than 20 years ago. Following the
internal rebellions explored in the last chapter that shattered the existing organizational structures
of these gangs, the city’s young gang members have reconstructed today’s gangs in entirely new
ways. Gone are the days of the cross-neighborhood, corporate-style gang nations; of exploitive
organizational arrangements that concentrated revenues and power in the hands of the few at the
expense of the many; of punitive and coercive violations; of ideological gangbanging; of semi-
profitable street-level drug dealing; of ambitions of careers as gang leaders and drug kingpins.
While the names of the city’s traditional street gangs live on, these names constitute perhaps the
only remnant of Chicago’s earlier gang era(s). Indeed, from the perspectives of contemporary
gang members, the chief legacy of the corporate street organizations of the war-torn 1990s is
how little their current gangs resemble these predecessors. As Carlos declared, “It ain’t like that no more, like in the nineties and shit. Man, hell naw.”

Black gangs in Chicago today are independent, neighborhood-based, democratic collectives generally consisting of around a dozen young, male members. The bonds between these members are based on personal relationships and common experiences as opposed to the conventional, ideological gang affiliations that had served as the basis for associations on the city’s streets for decades. Indeed, today’s gangs are increasingly comprised of members with different traditional gang affiliations; individuals who identify with gangs who have been longtime enemies, such as the Black Disciples and Mickey Cobras, are now often members of the same gangs. This series of paradigm shifts signifies a radically new era in Chicago’s storied gang history. Thus, to conceive of Chicago’s contemporary African American gangs in terms of the street organizations/gang nations of the late-twentieth century is to completely misunderstand these groups as they exist today. Gang members themselves clearly grasp this distinction, having replaced the antiquated language of nations and street organizations with more fitting references to blocks, ’hoods, and cliques. The terms street organization and clique, moreover, represent useful analytic models through which elemental shifts in the Chicago gang landscape can be understood. Table IV below provides a summary of differences between these archetypes along a number of key dimensions.

A number of recent studies have explored various dimensions of these developments. Major findings from these studies include: the deleterious effects of federal incarceration on the ability of gang leaders to control their organizations, the dissolution of cross-neighborhood gang coordination and unity, rising factionalism driven by competition over dwindling drug profits, the role of public housing demolition in exacerbating gang violence, increasing rebelliousness
TABLE IV
KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STREET ORGANIZATIONS AND CLIQUES

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among youthful gang members, and the loss of legitimacy and authority among gang leaders in the eyes of young gang members (Hagedorn, 2015; Hagedorn & Rauch, 2007; N. Moore & Williams, 2011; Ralph, 2010, 2014). The findings derived from the present research detailed over the last two chapters largely support and, to some degree, tie together the analyses described in these studies. Yet, the current analysis also offers a number of novel insights and alternative findings regarding the shattering of Chicago’s black street organizations and the constitution of the city’s contemporary black gangs, including: the eradication of not only centralized gang leadership hierarchies, but also the elimination of essentially all local positions of leadership, as well; the contested nature of this process, which often involved violent resistance on the part of young gang members; the democratization of gang governance and the adoption of egalitarianism and autonomy as chief principles of these collectives; the rejection of traditional gang ideologies and rivalries in favor of alliances rooted in personal relationships, shared
personal experiences, and neighborhood identity; the increasing ubiquity of gangs comprised of members with different street organization affiliations; the role of public housing demolition in not only exacerbating gang violence, but also in increasing familiarity between members of rival gangs, helping to facilitate these intergang alliances; the struggle for daily subsistence facing young gang members in the marijuana-based drug economy; and the view among young gang members that selling drugs does not constitute a viable career path. That some of these findings differ from those described in the research cited above might be due to variations in gang dynamics across neighborhoods. What seems more likely, however, is that differences in these findings are attributable to the continued transformation of Chicago’s street gangs since this previous research was conducted—which, based on the dates of publication, appears to be in the early to mid-2000s. The discussion below will shed further light on this possibility.

As discussed briefly in the concluding paragraph of the previous chapter and as demonstrated in the study findings presented over the course of the last two chapters, street gangs constitute dynamic, historical phenomena that both exist within history and have histories of their own. A holistic approach to gang research, therefore, must include a multilayered analysis of gangs’ history, the particular sociohistorical context within which gangs exist, and the ways in which these histories intersect and shape gangs and their members (Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2006, 2008, 2015; Hughes, 2006; Levenson, 2013; Ralph, 2010; Venkatesh, 2003; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). As such, a reliance on established perspectives on street gangs, even those developed through rigorous empirical research, can obscure accurate readings of these groups outside of the specific context(s) within which those perspectives were developed. With respect to the present research, for example, studies conducted on Chicago’s street gangs during the 1990s, which stressed their rigid, centralized leadership hierarchies, their unequivocal
emphasis on drug distribution, and the exploitation and coercion experienced by rank-and-file
gang soldiers, utterly fail to describe the city’s gangs as they exist today (Hagedorn, 2015; N.
Levitt, 2000). Nonetheless, while new research was required to explore contemporary street
gangs in Chicago, these earlier studies provided a historical background that was essential to
properly contextualizing the shattering and reconfiguration of these gangs.\textsuperscript{84} Conversely, these
processes could not be understood without accounting for the prominent roles played by
historical trends in patterns of drug consumption, political efforts to eliminate public housing,
and the expansion of the carceral state—conditions brought about by broader processes of
globalization and the diffusion of neoliberal political ideologies throughout the Western world
(Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2007; Hagedorn & Rauch, 2007; Smith, 1996; Wacquant, 2009;
Zelenko, 2014). The ways in which gang history and shifts in sociohistorical context intersect,
therefore, are indispensable to understanding both African American gangs in Chicago as they
exist today as well as the processes by which they reached their current state.\textsuperscript{85} Historically
contextualized studies of gangs outside of Chicago, moreover, have revealed similarly notable
transformations over time (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Hagedorn, 1998b; Levenson, 2013; J.

In the absence of such comprehensive, contextualized analyses, representations of gangs
are necessarily limited, often misleading, and, on occasion, blatantly inaccurate. Positivist,
variable-centric approaches to understanding street gangs, in particular, disregard essential

\textsuperscript{84} Obviously, the more recent studies described above offer insights of more immediate relevance to understanding
contemporary black gangs in Chicago. That these studies yielded findings that deviated from the paradigm
established by scholarship on the city’s gangs during the 1990s, however, lends further support to the view of gangs
as dynamic, historical phenomena.

\textsuperscript{85} As described in the literature review chapter, moreover, the importance of this type of multilayered historical
examination in understanding the recent trajectory of Chicago’s street gangs begins long before the 1990s (see
Diamond, 2009; Hagedorn, 2006).
contextual factors in order to isolate and analyze specific, generally individual-level variables of interest. Correlations between such variables are typically interpreted as the discovery of universal, objective truths about gangs, which are viewed as monolithic, and their members, who are reduced to amalgamations of risk factors and criminality. Thus, a great deal of—indeed, most—gang research treats these groups and their members as “social facts to be described rather than explained,” which has had the effect of “oversimplif[ying] representations of gangs and gang life, none of which adequately addresses the questions of how and why” (Hughes, 2006, p. 40, 44; see also Hagedorn, 1990; Short, 1998; Venkatesh, 2003). Intentionally or otherwise, such narrow approaches to understanding street gangs contribute to the proliferation of superficial, erroneous, and often demonizing representations of these groups as “highly plastic folk devil[s] outside of history” (Brotherton, 2015, p. i). These depictions, moreover, can be exploited by powerful social actors, such as law enforcement and elected officials, in order to maintain and accumulate power and resources while reinforcing denigrating stereotypes of urban youth of color (Brotherton, 2015; Conquergood, 1996; Hagedorn & Chesney-Lind, 2014; Levenson, 2013).

Even gang research that addresses questions of how and why, however, often fails to incorporate a historical perspective and falls into the intellectual trap of assuming that gangs are a static, if not monolithic, phenomenon. Studies describing gang formation and development, organizational arrangements, internal gang processes, and/or the relationships of gangs and their members to their families and wider communities, for example, tend to treat their findings as conclusive insights into these dynamics, as opposed to recognizing them as historically contingent and subject to change (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Densly, 2013; Jankowski, 1991;
Padilla, 1992; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Suttles, 1968, 1972; Thrasher, 1927). Thus, although such studies often include contextual analyses and intellectually allow for the possibility of variations in these phenomena between gangs or across location, they do not account for the possibility of gang transformation. The radical reconfiguration of Chicago’s black street gangs presented over the course of the last two chapters demonstrates the serious shortcomings associated with such ahistorical approaches to understanding street gangs.

An important implication related to the argument for a historical understanding of street gangs is that processes of gang resistance, as illustrated in the analysis presented in the fourth and fifth chapters, are similarly dynamic and historically contingent. This dynamism leaves open the possibility of harnessing and redirecting this impulse of resistance away from internecine warfare and toward prosocial endeavors (see Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2008). This possibility will be revisited in the concluding chapter. First, however, the following chapter explores the ways in which the dynamics described above have transformed the nature of contemporary gang violence in Chicago.

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86 Densly’s (2013) claim to “the definitive account of ‘how gangs work’” (back cover) represents perhaps the most egregious example of this dynamic.
VII. FINDINGS: THE ANATOMY OF CONTEMPORARY GANG VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO

As described in the literature review and briefly in the opening pages of Chapter 5, the wars waged by Chicago’s street organizations during the 1990s over control of illicit drug markets and organizational supremacy made that decade one of the most violent in the city’s history. The crack cocaine epidemic that hit Chicago at the close of the 1980s had ushered in a new era of unprecedented profits in the underground economy of illicit drug distribution, and competition over these profits shattered many of the city’s traditional gang alliances and triggered ferocious warfare among longtime fraternal gangs, such as the Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples and the Vice Lords and Four Corner Hustlers. These wars were directed by powerful gang leaders, many of whom called the (literal) shots from the state’s penitentiaries. This violence was carried out, however, by young, rank-and-file gang soldiers, thousands of whom lost their lives in these conflicts. The cross-neighborhood structure of Chicago’s street gangs during this period meant that these wars similarly transcended neighborhood boundaries (Hagedorn, 2015). The war between the Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples, for example, was fought wherever these gangs and their members came into contact—from Englewood to the Robert Taylor Homes to Cook County Jail (Venkatesh, 2000).

The nature of gang violence in Chicago during the 1990s, then, represented a natural extension of the organizational characteristics of the city’s gangs during that period, particularly with respect to their cross-neighborhood structure, autocratic leadership hierarchies, and emphasis on outlaw capitalism. The shattering and reconfiguration of Chicago’s black street gangs has similarly transformed the nature of contemporary gang violence in the city in ways that mirror the trajectory of these gangs themselves. The following chapter explores the
particularities of this violence drawing primarily from data collected from study participants regarding their involvement in recent fights and shooting incidents as well as fatal events involving their fallen comrades.87

**Localization and Alliance Renegotiation: The Scope and Structure of Gang Warfare**

Just as contemporary African American street gangs in Chicago are radically different than their late-twentieth century predecessors, the nature of violence between these gangs is likewise radically different today than it was 15–20 years ago. Among the most pronounced shifts in gang warfare during this period has been the fracturing and localization of gang conflicts. On one hand, the shattering of Chicago’s black street organizations and the eradication of centralized gang leadership hierarchies means that the level of organizational sophistication required to direct expansive, cross-neighborhood gang wars no longer exists among the city’s black street gangs. On the other hand, the retreat of Chicago’s now-independent gang factions from citywide and prison-based gang politics in favor of insular neighborhood concerns means that current gang members are preoccupied with local matters and have no interest in such large-scale, ideological gang wars. The scope of the city’s gang wars, therefore, has been drastically reduced, as coordinated, citywide campaigns regulated by centralized gang leadership hierarchies have been replaced with distinctly parochial conflicts determined at the local level. The dozen or so top-down gang wars of the 1990s, in other words, have been replaced with a complex web of perhaps a couple hundred hyperlocal gang conflicts taking place at any given time throughout the city. As James stated, “It really be a block versus block type of thing, or clique versus clique. It

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87 The term gang violence as used in this chapter does not refer to all violence in which gang members partake. Members of two different gangs fighting one another, for example, does not necessarily constitute gang violence if the dispute was not driven by or did not give rise to gang-specific animosities. In short, this chapter focuses on “incidents that are part of a longstanding rivalry between gangs or that give rise to these kinds of animosities” (Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974, p. 239). Using this definition, the majority of violent events described by study participants, including nearly all such events involving lethal violence, can be classified as gang violence.
don’t really be about no organization thing no more.” Accordingly, gang conflicts in Chicago today typically take place between gangs within a mile’s distance of one another, and often much closer than that—that is, between gangs whose geographic proximity brings them into regular contact with one another. The splintering of once-sizeable neighborhood sets and the attendant fragmentation of gang territories, moreover, has contributed to the propinquity of these conflicts, as an area that previously contained four street gangs might now be home to ten independent gangs, each with a territory no larger than a handful of square blocks. Below, for example, Marco offers a snapshot of these dynamics as they exist in his neighborhood:

I be on Maryland and 75th, and we into it with [at war with], like, a little diameter around there [tracing a square with his index finger on the desk]. And then you go to [another] BD set, D-Mob [pointing a short distance away on the desk], they into it with these GDs [moving his finger a few inches to his right]. You know, everybody [each gang] got they own little oppositions….

We into it with niggas three blocks to the left. We into it with niggas two blocks down—that’s 77th and Maryland…. And then four blocks up on 71st and Langley, them some more GDs that’s called Mac Block [another rival gang]. Then the one next to us called Super City and then the one on 77th, that’s called Rico World. Each of them got they own set of guys and stuff….

We could see them every day. Like, we be on our block and look to the left, we see ’em posted up [hanging out]. They so close, I could be like [cupping his hand around his mouth], “Hey!,” and they’ll look, you know? And I’ll probably drop the rakes at they ass, you know, they’ll crack the treys or something. This the same people we have shootouts with. It’s so crazy, though, ’cause they right there, you feel me?… I gotta get on the bus past them every day when I come on the block. I get on the bus and go past they block every day. They don’t be seeing me, though. They caught my homie on the bus. They tried to do something to him, but they was scared. They ain’t want to, really.

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88 The implementation of strategies to reduce such contact, however, typically becomes necessary at the onset of hostilities. The adverse effects of gang wars on the members of these groups and the strategies they employ to cope with these effects will be explored in the following chapter.
89 “Dropping the rakes” and “cracking the treys” denote disrespectful inversions of the Gangster Disciples’ pitchfork hand sign and the Black Disciples’ three-fingered salute, respectively.
90 Marco had recently moved out of his gang’s immediate neighborhood but continued to commute to his old block every day to hang out with his friends.
The shattering and restructuring of Chicago’s black street gangs as insular, intimate groups has also made survival within the city’s highly fractured gang landscape an increasingly daunting prospect for these gangs. As the quote from Marco above suggests, today’s gangs—which typically consist of less than a dozen members and “control” a relatively small territory—are often besieged by a variety of rival groups within their immediate vicinity. Yet, contemporary gangs also lack the support and resources once provided by their wider street organizations that helped them navigate such difficult circumstances, including the provision of firearms, money, additional manpower, strategic expertise, and diplomatic influence (see, for example, the quote from Lamont on page 99; see also Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). Independence and insularity, in other words, have come at a cost. To help offset the loss of support and security once provided by their street organizations, black gangs in Chicago today are developing new, informal alliances with one another. This practice, referred to as “cliquing up,” can effectively double the manpower and firepower at a gang’s disposal during times of crisis. Gang members often view such alliances as an essential survival strategy, especially since their enemies have usually formed one or more of these alliances, as well. Consider, for example, the following quote, in which Carlos describes the indispensability of this practice:

Man, it’s so many niggas out here cliqued up, man, you—niggas cliquin’ up, G, tryin’ to stay alive out here, you feel me? One ‘hood ain’t gon’ do it on its own. Gonna need some backup ’cause if that [enemy] ’hood come with another ’hood, then they two times as strong as you are, you feel me? So you gon’ have to make a phone call: “Folks, come check it out,” woo-wop-the-bam. Mu’fuckas gettin’ into it, shit.

These alliances are almost always rooted in shared enmity for mutual enemies and/or preexisting personal relationships between their members. Either way, cliquing up creates a context within

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91 This wartime support is typically referred to as “aid and assist” among gangs that were once part of the Folks alliance. A number of participants who identified as Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples still used this terminology.
which such personal relationships are developed or strengthened and within which enemies
often—though not always—become mutual. Jabari explains the various processes by which
these alliances are established and solidified as follows:

Man, I’m finna tell you straight up how niggas be linkin’ up, man. Niggas be cliquin’ up
like, “OK, y’all into with these people, and we into it with ’em, too? A’ight, we finna
clique up.” Then in the midst of us cliquin’ up, everybody kickin’ it, gettin’ to know
each other. Then you find out like, “Damn, Folks and them cool as hell. Glad we cliqued
up with them.” And y’all finna go turn up on [wreak havoc on] y’all oppositions. That’s
how people link up.

Or this side hear y’all makin’ noise down the street, and we know y’all makin’ noise
down the street, but we never got into it [two nearby gangs who are unfamiliar with one
another catch wind of one another’s respective reputation for violence]. And we see one
of each others and get to talkin’: “Yeah, let’s link up,” woo, woo, woo. You might have
your gun on you, I got my gun on me, now we done traded guns. And we up here like [to
your comrades], “Let’s get it. I traded bangers with them. We straight now—we cliqued
up with them.”

[Or] y’all probably knew the same person who died or something. Anything make a
person clique up. Some people be related [to members of other gangs].

Although cliquing up can provide a crucial measure of support within the context of gang
warfare, however, the practice also has its drawbacks. For one, receiving support in the face of
conflict also requires the reciprocation of such support with respect to the wars being fought by
one’s allies. Thus, although cliquing up tends to increase a gang’s capacity to defend itself and
visit violence upon its enemies, it also tends to expand this pool of enemies, as well. In addition,
cliqued up gangs might be treated as responsible for the actions of their allies even if they did not
partake in or approve of those actions. A high propensity for violence, then, can make a gang a
particularly useful ally within the context of active gang warfare, but it can also make that gang a
liability to have as an ally due to the likelihood that its violent proclivities will work to attract

92 Exchanging firearms symbolizes the establishment of a trusting relationship between two gangs. As both guns
have likely been used in previous shootings, these exchanges mean that each gang now possesses a vital piece of
evidence that could be used to incriminate members of the other gang.
enemies at an exceptional rate. Below, for example, Weezy describes the impact of these
dynamics on the dissolution of his gang’s alliance with another group whose reckless violence
thrust Weezy and his comrades into an unwanted war with a gang a few short blocks away:

This is why I said we don’t clique up with other sets…. It’s a clique called CMB [that we
were cliqued up with]…. Under our nose, they shot at the crew down the street from us.
They shot at them without us knowin’, though….

And by us bein’ so close, they [the gang who was shot at] thought it was us, but whole
time it was them [CMB]. But we already cliqued up with ’em. So when that shit
happened, we kinda parted ways with ’em like, “Damn, y’all just got a war started, and
we not even on that with them,” you know? And so the GDs [the gang on the receiving
end of the shooting], they so fluky and gay and shit, they started shootin’ at us, but they
know it was CMB. They know where they set at…. They shit on 76th and Vernon.
And, shit, I guess niggas don’t wanna go over. Since we so close, fam, they just wanna
pick the fight with us. But whole time, it wasn’t us. And that’s why we don’t clique up
with nobody no more, ’cause you don’t never know what they could be doin’ and then
put it on us. Now we got all type of heat comin’ our way that we don’t need… [You]
don’t never know what niggas on [up to].

The fracturing and localization of gang warfare and gangs’ need to renegotiate alliances
in the wake of broader organizational dissolution, thus, have worked to heighten the uncertainty
surrounding much of the gang violence in Chicago today relative to the wars of past decades.
These shifts, however, represent only the tip of the proverbial iceberg with respect to the
transformation of gang violence in Chicago during the early-twentieth century. The following
section explores the radical shifts in the causes of gang violence from the 1990s to today.

**The Etiology of Today’s Gang Wars**

Despite the increasing centrality of neighborhood among Chicago’s contemporary black
street gangs and the localization of the conflicts in which they are embroiled, these conflicts are
decidedly not related to the types of territorial, drug market-related disputes that motivated much
of the gang violence during the 1990s. This shift away from territorial, drug-related gang
violence is largely a byproduct of two interrelated developments pertaining to urban drug
markets over the last two decades. The first of these developments, discussed in detail over the course of the last two chapters, is the declining profitability of retail-level drug distribution associated with marijuana’s displacement of crack cocaine as the drug of choice among urban drug consumers. The second, associated development, described briefly in Chapter 5, is the shift away from open-air neighborhood drug markets in favor of more covert, customer-specific sales practices. In practical terms, this means that drug sales are increasingly negotiated by phone between buyers and sellers who have an established relationship rather than impersonally on a street corner. Product demand and attendant levels of profitability are generally not high enough to justify the risk of maintaining open-air drug markets, which tend to draw intense police scrutiny and are more susceptible to slow-downs related to suppressive law enforcement tactics or to public violence related to gang wars. Together, these changes have rendered the control of neighborhood drug markets increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of Chicago’s current gang members. Violent competition over these markets among the city’s gangs, therefore, has overwhelmingly dissipated: only one of the roughly two dozen gang wars described by study participants could be classified as a dispute over ownership of drug territory. Few violent incidents, moreover, involved disputes over money or other financial matters, a particular point of clarification for a number of participants during their interviews. Below, for example, Lamont challenges what he views as common misrepresentation about the nature of gang violence:

   It was never, like, a conflict over [pausing]… drugs…. It was never like, “Y’all comin’ on our territory and servin’ [selling drugs], so we into it.” It wasn’t ever that…. It ain’t no—you know, like what the news be tryin’ to say is, “Well, it’s the drugs.” It’s not that. It wasn’t that when I was a kid. It wasn’t no, “Aw, man, they stole 10 bricks, so” duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh. It wasn’t none of that, right? So it was really people gettin’ into it because of beefs, not because of territories or drugs….

93 As discussed in Chapter 5, moreover, the demolition of Chicago’s public housing projects has also contributed to the declining profitability of the city’s drug markets and their diminished value to the city’s street gangs.
Sometimes gangs say, “Look, we want more territory, so we gon’ battle them every day until they move back.” We didn’t even do that…. The territory was established. Ours was ours—the GDs’ was the GDs’, the Stones’ was the Stones’. You know at a certain time you don’t go past 61th Street. 61st and Rhodes to 61st and King Drive, you don’t do that. Now if you wanna get to 63rd and King Drive from Cottage Grove, you take 60th Street—that back road. You take that back road all the way to King Drive. ’Cause other than that, you gotta go through the Folks’ ’hood to get to where you gotta go.

The following passage from Marco, on the other hand, illustrates the increasing irrelevance of territorial drug markets as well as the roles played by police suppression and gang violence in contributing their decline. Most revealing, however, is his description of a recent gang war that had unintentionally pushed two nearby rival gangs off of their respective blocks—where, presumably, at least some drugs were being sold. Not only was this war not driven by economic or territorial considerations, but the inadvertent annexation of rival gang territories and drug markets yielded no material benefit for Marco and his peers, whose utterly desperate economic circumstances persisted uninterrupted. Lacking the motivation and capacity to maintain this geographic expansion, moreover, Marco’s gang soon relinquished control of these blocks back to their rivals.

On our block, money used to be made more, you know, the block used to be jukin’ [lively], you feel me? Mu’fuckas would make a decent amount of money sellin’ they weed and stuff, man. But now it’s a time when we lost a couple of the guys, man. A lot of people in jail. Block slow [local demand for drugs is low], and we into it heavy [a number of gang wars have intensified violence in the neighborhood]. Budheads [marijuana consumers] scared to come out and buy weed. And the police so thirsty [overly eager]. Like, right now on our block, they sit there 24/7 [all day, every day]…. We used to be cool with one clique back in 2011, though, that was CMB…. When we was with them, bro, we was fuckin’ shit up, man…. The whole 75th strip—like, our opps on 75th and Langley call theyself Super City or whatever. But when we was with CMB doin’ all them drills [shootings], man, wasn’t nobody on 75th, you know? From 75th and Maryland all the way to King Drive. And then when I got out the joint, standin’ on that block, it was my first time actually posted out there in a long time, it felt good. We moved they ass around—Maryland all the way to King Drive. The Moes on Eberhart, we moved they ass around, too. ’Cause mu’fuckas applyin’ pressure, though, you know? Doing drills, drills, drills. But thinkin’ about that, man, it’s like all it was doin’, man—a’ight, we moved them around, but how does that benefit me? You know, really, though.
Like, a’ight, I sell drugs, I got $20 in my pocket, but this my life savings, you feel me? Like, come on, man.

Violence based on traditional ideological gang rivalries has also diminished dramatically in recent years. As described above, the citywide ideological gang wars of previous decades have ended. The previous two chapters, moreover, have chronicled young gang members’ increasing rejection of Chicago’s traditional ideological rivalries and their development of intimate cross-gang alliances. Current gang members, in other words, no longer view these ideological rivalries as a legitimate basis for gang warfare. Furthermore, as the city’s black street gangs are increasingly comprised of members who identify with various traditional street organization affiliations, the conflicts in which these gangs are embroiled now often involve violence between individuals who share traditional organizational identities. Recall, for example, Terrence’s account of the dissolution of his Mickey Cobra set: he and his age cohort of MCs united with their Black Disciple friends in a war against Bang City, an adjacent MC set that also included a number of members who identified as Gangster Disciples, and the older MCs from Terrence’s own neighborhood. In other words, just as traditional gang ideologies no longer serve as the basis for intergang violence in Chicago, they also no longer preclude violence between individuals or groups with the same traditional gang identities.\(^{94}\) Rather, as a result of the fracturing and increasing insularity of the city’s African American street gangs, everyone outside the confines of “the block,” regardless of their organizational affiliation, is generally viewed as a potential enemy (at least until proven otherwise).\(^{95}\) Personal relationships and

\(^{94}\) To fully grasp the ideological implications of a war between a gang comprised of MCs and BDs and another comprised of MCs and GDs, it should be noted that both the BDs and GDs are traditional ideological enemies of the MCs. The BDs and GDs, moreover, together had once constituted the Black Gangster Disciple Nation before splitting into two fraternal gangs and eventually fighting a fierce war over the control of drug markets and organizational supremacy during the 1990s.

\(^{95}\) This reality is, perhaps, best captured by the adoption of the motto “EBK,” or everybody killer, among some of Chicago’s street gangs.
neighborhood allegiances, in other words, have become the sole delimiters of gang violence in Chicago. The following quotes from Jabari and Memphis help illustrate this dynamic:

**Jabari:** It be Gangsters gettin’ into it with Gangsters.… I’m not gon’ get into it with my own group of Gangsters, [but] even if he a Insane [Gangster Disciple, like Jabari himself], I’ll still get into it with this nigga, I don’t care. If you ain’t from my ’hood, fuck you. That’s how it is everywhere—if you ain’t from that ’hood, it’s: “Fuck you.”… You got GDs killin’ GDs, Stones killin’ Stones.

**Memphis:** If you ain’t from the block—that’s how it go, basically: if you ain’t from the block, fuck you. You can be BD, GD—I don’t give a fuck what you is. But that’s how it is now. See, when structure was out, [if] you BD, you BD. I don’t give a fuck what block you from, if you BD and a BD touch you, [that person would] get fucked up [violated]. It ain’t like that no more, you know what I’m sayin’?

Just as personal relationships serve as the foundation for contemporary gang allegiances, moreover, interpersonal animosities likewise tend to serve as the foundation for modern gang conflicts. These animosities might develop for any number of reasons, most of which are typical sources of interpersonal conflicts among adolescent males and young adults more generally, including status and jealousy, competition over the attentions of young women, gossip, perceived disrespect, neighborhood pride, and personality clashes. The war described above between Montrelle, Terrence, and Rick’s gang and Bang City, for example, started as a dispute over a stolen bicycle. Members of Bang City alleged that Fetty, a friend of Montrelle’s, but not a Black Disciple himself, had stolen a bicycle belonging to one of their members. This led to a number of physical altercations in which Montrelle and other BDs lent their support to Fetty, effectively starting a war between themselves and Bang City. As described in the previous chapter, this war eventually drew in Terrence, Rick, and other youthful Mickey Cobras from their neighborhood who were close friends with Montrelle’s nearby set of BD, creating a rift with the older members of their gang who sided with Bang City, their longtime allies and MC counterparts. Thus, a dispute over a bicycle allegedly stolen by an individual who was not even a gang member
ultimately drew in three different gangs, violently and irreparably fractured one of them, and claimed approximately a half-dozen lives over a three- or four-year period. Below, Antonio offers another example of the interpersonal roots of many of Chicago’s contemporary gang wars:

Like I said, I really ain’t seen mu’fuckas really get into it over no—on no structure [traditional ideological gangbanging] or no, “Aw, well y’all this [gang], we that [gang], so we gon’ come over here.” … The biggest situation [gang war] we done had was over a girl. ‘Cause one of the guys was fuckin’ with one of the other dudes from across the way—one of his little sisters or some shit. Little sister went back like, “Oh, he touched [sexually assaulted] me,” this, that, and the third. Come to find out, she was rockin’ [having sex with] him anyway, you feel me? But by that time, shit had already escalated—mu’fuckas done already got into it. Mu’fuckas comin’ on the block, sprayin’ the block [shooting the block up], [we] go back over there, do our thing or whatever.

Even longstanding gang conflicts that were once driven by traditional ideological gang rivalries and/or economic considerations have been reframed by current gang members in terms of personal grievances. For example, Durrell described the decades-old gang wars between his set of Black Disciples and local Gangster Disciple and Mickey Cobra gangs not in ideological terms, but in terms of the loved ones he had lost to these wars:

It ain’t really no gangs, ’cause once you already killed somebody that somebody done grew up with, you know, and you loved ’em, anytime it could go up [violence could erupt]. So it ain’t really never really be because of no gang. Once you killed one of the guys or you done hurt one of the guys, you feel like you wanna get back at ’em, you know? So they gon’ do the same. So it just go on and on.… Some blocks you get into it with since forever. It’ll never really be over, it’ll just die down, you know? Then something might happen and it might get back up [clapping his hands].

As described in the examples above, interpersonal conflicts between members of different gangs typically do not remain as such; rather, they are transformed into collective gang wars. Such transformations are largely driven by the principles of group solidarity and collective liability espoused by these gangs. Within the context of gang conflict, group solidarity means that an attack on any one member of a gang is interpreted as an attack on the entire gang and,
thus, cause for collective retaliation (see Chapter 4). Harold aptly summarizes this principle as follows:

You with these guys so much, every day you posted on the block with ’em, it’s like they became your brothers…. We’ll ride for each other [help one another when a conflict arises]. They get into a fight, we ridin’. Somebody shoot at them, it feel like they shootin’ at you ’cause it’s like that’s your brother ’cause you be with him more than your own family.

The flip side of this ideological coin is the principle of collective liability, which regards the actions of each member as a representation of the will of the entire gang; the gang, in turn, is then considered responsible for the actions of each of its member (see also Horowitz, 1983; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974; Short, 1974). This principle is perhaps best exemplified in a number of participant accounts of gang shootings wherein the intended targets were described impersonally as “any” member of the opposition. Ultimately, these principles make the settling of grievances between rival gangs particularly challenging, as antagonisms between individuals are assumed by their respective gangs, depersonalized, and reframed as collective vendettas, which can persist long after the death, incarceration, or “retirement” of the initial antagonists.

Carlos’s description of an altercation over a dice game the night before his interview, which he noted would likely spark a prolonged gang war, offers a compelling account of these ideologies in action:

It rarely happens where it crack [a conflict is sparked] and then it just go a week. If it crack, it crack [persists], you feel me?… [Because] when you get into it with one, you get into it with all of ’em….

Like, last night, shit, a mu’fucka smokin’ loud [high-potency marijuana] in the building, shootin’ dice [craps]. A mu’fucka got into it [an argument] over a point. He—nigga, I guess he thought since his homie come over here and fuck with us [hangs out with us], he could talk however he wanted to talk. Shit, that ain’t what the case was, you feel me, ’cause he ain’t get out the building safely….

Indeed, a number of gang scholars have identified the threat of violence as the very foundation for gang cohesion (see, for example, Decker, 1996; Short & Strodtebeck, 1965; Short, 1974; Yablonsky, 1962).
Shorty, he hit [rolled] a six, and we shootin’ six-eight bets. I wasn’t even on the bet, you feel me, I was just sittin’ there, chillin’, smokin’ loud, watchin’ and shit. Dude—they had a six-eight bet [and] they was shootin’ fives [five-dollar bets]. Dude had five [dollars bet] on the point and I guess his point was eight [rolling an eight would win him the bet]. When he hit a six, he picked up all the money. Folks snapped on him like, “You tweakin’.” And they got to arguin’ back and forth like, woo-wop-the-bam, “It’s my point,” goin’ back and forth, back and forth. All we know, Folks hit him. But once he hit him, we all hit him, you feel me? Plus, dude who end up gettin’ hit, his homie usually come through, fuck with us, but he got fucked up, too, just off [the principle]—“That’s your mans. You ride with him, you die with him.” You know how that shit go.…

It’s fucked up, but, shit, it’s the way it gotta be, you feel me?… Shit, if he gotta go [get assaulted], he gotta go. Whether right or wrong—if my niggas right or wrong, you get left [disposed of] for my niggas, shit.

Group solidarity and collective liability, however, are not the only ideologies shaping the nature of contemporary gang violence in Chicago. As suggested in Carlos’s narrative above, individual autonomy also plays a fundamental role in shaping these conflicts. The following section, then, explores the implications of this autonomy and of the shifts in the causes of gang violence discussed above on patterns of violence as well as gang members’ attempts to make meaning of this violence.

**Autonomy, Unpredictability, and Making Meaning of Gang Violence**

Just as the eradication of centralized gang leadership hierarchies has deregulated gang violence by shifting the control of gang wars to the city’s now-independent neighborhood gangs, the democratization of these gangs has had a similar effect on the sanctioning of violence at the individual level. The authority to authorize or prohibit violence, in other words, is no longer limited to a handful of designated individuals, as such privileged positions of gang leadership have been eliminated. Instead, the paradigm of individual autonomy embraced by Chicago’s contemporary black street gangs means that each gang member is now regarded as possessing

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97 A bet in which a six or an eight comes up on the first roll of the dice and the winning roll becomes whichever of these two numbers did not come up on the initial roll.
the inherent sovereignty to make his own decisions with respect to participation in violence. On one hand, gang members are no longer being coerced by their superiors into committing acts of violence against their rivals. Conversely, however, no gang member has the power to constrain the use of violence beyond himself, either, as such decisions are now considered and correspondingly acted upon by each member individually at any given time. Given the intimate quality of relationships between current gang members, the sentiments of one’s comrades, no doubt, have some effect on a decision to carry out an act of violence or not. Yet, all members acknowledge that each of their counterparts possesses the personal autonomy to commit an act of violence or abstain from committing an act of violence even if doing so flies in the face of the gang’s collective sentiment. The following narrative from Marco clearly illustrates the bi-directional nature of this autonomy: his inebriated comrade, Wells, exercised autonomy in carrying out an ill-advised daytime assault on member of a rival group while Marco exercised his own autonomy in refusing to accompany Wells on the attack. As Marco explains:

It’s 10 in the morning, we at Lu-Lu crib, man. He [Wells] was in a car, he saw the opps on 77th and Maryland. Now, it’s 10 in the morning! He like, “What’s up, man? I’m finna go score [shoot an enemy].” I’m: “Naw, Folks, I don’t think you should do that, man, it’s too bright outside, you know?” He get to: “Man, what, you scared?” I’m: “Naw.” You know, but I’m smart, though. I don’t let nobody dictate my pace. It’s a lot of people out here in the streets, some people be followers, you know, some be leaders. I ain’t gon’ consider I’m a leader or follower, I just don’t let nobody dictate my pace, you know? [Siren wailing on the street in the background]. So he called me scared and shit. A sucker would’ve went down there with him. I stood on my own two. I’m: “Naw, bro, I ain’t finna do that, man. That’s stupid, bro. It’s 10 in the morning. We ain’t got no mask or no nothing.” He: “Man, fuck that, I’m finna go down there myself.” One of my bros didn’t want him to go by himself so he went with him.… So they go down there, man, he shoot the spot up. And he ended up shooting somebody, man. Dude got shot four times and shit. Folks changed his clothes, popped back on the block like ain’t shit happen, you know? That’s what—mu’fuckas do that, they pop up on the block like ain’t shit happen.… Folks [was] drunk, I don’t know, he [was] feelin’

98 The one exception to this general rule appears to be that, in situations of ostensibly unavoidable violence involving two or more group members, it is generally viewed as unacceptable for a member to run or otherwise not defend his comrade(s).
himself or whatever. But, anyway, Folks who went down there thirsty [overly eager], he
locked up right now. 'Cause mu’fuckas saw his face, mu’fucka tellin’ on him, you
know?

The intensity of this ethos of autonomy among contemporary African American street
gangs in Chicago, moreover, extends even beyond the use of violence within the context of
active gang conflicts. Participants reported, for example, that gang members are individually
capable of starting wars with other groups—even those considered to be allies—as well as
breaking peace treaties that had been established to quell violence with existing rivals. In the
past, such unilateral action on the part of a gang soldier would have undoubtedly resulted in a
prompt and severe violation. In the early years of the twenty-first century, however, Chicago’s
African American gang members no longer regard such traditional mechanisms of controlling
gang violence as viable. On a practical level, the chains of command that existed in previous
decades have been eradicated, and no one today possesses the authority to order or carry out
violations. Indeed, gang leaders’ coercive and abusive use of violations was among the chief
grievances identified by participants as bringing about the popular rebellions that ousted these
leaders. Thus, on an ideological level, current gang members are fiercely opposed to the use of
violations in any capacity; more accurately, violations have been excised from their collective
conscious as a possibility under any circumstances. Although the principle of individual
autonomy means that the actions of each gang member do not necessarily reflect the collective
will of their comrades, and despite the very real possibility that these actions will bring about
collectively detrimental consequences, these dynamics are simply accepted by today’s gang
members as a cost of membership in an egalitarian collective. The following quotes from
Terrence and Rasheed demonstrate both the tremendous breadth of gang members’ personal
autonomy as well as the obsolescence of violations implied by their omission from these passages:

**Terrence:** People do what they wanna do and we just follow ’em. Like, if somebody wanna get into it with them [another gang], we help ’em no matter what [clapping his hands]. Just ’cause that’s our friend…. I mean, we’ll tell ’em sometimes—like, if it was somebody we didn’t wanna get into it with, really, like, [a gang] a lot of us was cool with, we’ll try to tell ’em like, “Leave it alone.” But if he keep forcin’ the issue, we don’t have no choice. Either stop messin’ with him or help him. And most of the time, like I said, I’ve been knowin’ most of these guys all my life. I’m not just gon’ stop messin’ with them. So, basically, I have to pick a side.

**Rasheed:** Shit, mu’fuckas steady wantin’ [peace]. It’s just, man, once the blood drawn, though, bro, that shit be fucked up, B. ’Cause you could—put it like this: we into it [with another gang, but due to a peace treaty] all 50 of us calm, you feel me? All 50 of them or however many of them, they sittin’ back, they cool. You feel me, we just coexisting. It’s still that one mu’fucka from probably either set or both sets—probably two mu’fuckas—who still got it in ’em like, “Man, fuck them niggas, man. Ain’t no peace with them niggas.” Know what I’m sayin’? And then [they’ll] pull some shit, [and] fuck the whole agreement up. And then it’s like, “A’ight, mu’fuckas just fucked the treaty up. It’s back on,” know what I’m sayin’? Especially if mu’fuckas scored [shot someone] or something. **Definitely** if a mu’fucka scored. Oh, yeah, it’s on! So, shit, one bad—like they say, one bad apple, B. Come on, man, it’s earth—it’s hell on earth. It’s always gon’ be a bad apple, man.

As suggested in the narratives above, the ideology of personal autonomy among Chicago’s contemporary black street gangs has made gang violence in the city much more volatile today than in the past. As described in the previous section, very little of this violence is related to the types of explicit, instrumental causes typical of gang warfare during earlier periods, such as the campaigns waged over drug markets and organizational supremacy during the 1990s or even the conflicts over territory and access to scarce public accommodations during earlier periods (see, for example, Dawley, 1992; Diamond, 2009; Thrasher, 1927). These types of goal-oriented conflicts typically required concerted, persistent campaigns until one side or the other proved victorious. Lacking such discernible goals, however, the gang wars of today more closely resemble collective vendettas driven by hostilities that have been built up over the course
of a series of violent incidents between two groups. Some of the gang violence described by study participants, then, was specifically retaliatory, taking place in the immediate aftermath of another violent incident or hostile confrontation. Yet, much of the violence participants described was unrelated to any specific provocation; rather, the very existence of a gang war, itself, was cited as justifiable grounds for such violence. Lacking a precipitating provocation, then, much of the violence within the context of Chicago’s contemporary gang wars does not conform to a readily identifiable and predictable pattern. Consider the following accounts from Marco, Carlos, and Terrence of gang shootings that each of them had been involved in around the time of their respective interviews. Note that none of these incidents was preceded by a specific provocation:

**Marco:** Just the other day—when was this? Like, last week—the end of last week or something. I had, um—a’ight, you know, we be on Maryland and Cottage Grove and stuff. We got a cut [hiding place] to put the gun on Cottage Grove, but we be movin’ the gun from Cottage to the alley inside an abandoned garage just to keep it more safer, you feel me, instead of bein’ on Cottage.

So we on Cottage, [but] I feel like we ain’t safe, though, right now. So I’m: “A’ight, I’m finna put the gun on Cottage.” So I grab the gun. I’m like, “Fuck it. I’m right here, I might as well slide on bro and them upstairs who be on Evans [a block away].” So I hit them cuts [gangways]. I got the gun on me. So as I get up there, I’m finna ring the bell, I’m like, man, fuck it, I might as well go through the opps’ shit [an enemy gang territory a block away from his friend’s house]. I’m right here, this close with the gun, fuck it, let me go try to score [shoot a member of the rival gang]. A’ight, now I go through the cut. Folks and them like, “Hey, man, where you goin’?” I was like, “Man, I’m finna go [motioning his hands like he’s shooting a basketball].” He know what that mean: I’m finna go score, you know? He: “A’ight, man, I’ll be waitin’ on you when you get back.”

**Carlos:** We was shootin’ dice in the alley… Shit, the opps slid through and hit a boy on the [adjacent] porch. They shot the porch up and hit a lil innocent boy….

It really wasn’t even an issue [that precipitated the shooting], you feel me? ’Cause, like I said, you don’t have to have an issue. They can just slide down on you if they feel like. On a hot day, you feel me: “Oh, this a good days to slide down on the opps’ shit.” You blowin’ [shooting] some shit down, you feel me? You see a mu’fucka lackin’ [without a gun] out here—you lackin’, man, it’s crackin’. Mu’fuckas gon’ take that chance. They gon’ pop your ass, and they not gon’ hesitate ’cause you lackin’ out here, you feel me?
So that’s a easy kill, basically, for a mu’fucka out here…. So it really wasn’t even an incident. They pulled up and start shootin’, you feel me, just off the incident—’cause we been had an incident previous times…. It’s a war.

Terrence: [The last shooting I was involved in was] about two days ago [laughing]…. We drove down Eberhart and shot [at members of a rival gang]. They was just outside, wasn’t payin’ attention, so [my friends] shot…. We at war—it’s a war. So, basically, we do it ’cause of the war. It’s nothing that actually drives us that make us get up, go do it. We do it ’cause of the war….

I haven’t thought about it ’til you brought it up [laughing]…. Really [it’s] everyday life. Yeah, it really is a everyday life. It’s just like, the moment when you step out your house, you know what you be done did, and you know people that out here lookin’—that’s willin’ to shoot you. So, basically, it’s a everyday life. You have to keep your eyes open.

As the passages above indicate, although a great deal of contemporary gang violence is unpredictable, it is also regarded, somewhat paradoxically, as routine and often employed with a startling degree of casualness. Thus, this violence not only erupts at times of acute, inconsolable rage (see, for example, the account of Wells’s ill-fated, alcohol-driven shooting near the beginning of this section), but also occurs unremarkably within the course of “everyday life.” Indeed, for young people who grew up in the midst of Chicago’s drug wars during the 1990s and came of age during the internal rebellions and parochial gang wars of the early twenty-first century, gang warfare has come to be understood as a fact of life to which they must adapt and of which they must make meaning. The eradication of the city’s black street organizations and the decline in urban drug markets, however, have stripped much of the conventional instrumentality and purpose from such violence. There are no longer any lucrative drug markets to take over. There are no positions of leadership or prosperity to which gang members might ascend. There is no greater ideological cause associated with the building of one’s “nation” through the elimination of another. Despite the fact that many of today’s gangs consist of merely a handful of members at any given time, moreover, there is no ambition of complete annihilation. Instead,
for participants and other young gang members, participation in violence is a way of making sense of the brutality that surrounds them—of finding a place in an unforgiving world where the ultimate measure of camaraderie is bearing the burden of vengeance carried by one’s comrades. To develop a reputation as a “driller,” an individual with a proven willingness to employ lethal violence against his adversaries in the name of brotherhood, then, is the greatest height to which many of today’s gang members feel they can realistically aspire. Harold explains this grim reality as follows:

Now, I think people—these young guys are tryin’ to prove theyself to the older cats, you know what I’m sayin’? Like, “Yeah, I’m a driller—I’m a shooter. Yeah.”  *Woo, woo, woo.* And then once they first time they shoot, they get that [response like], “Oh yeah, Folk, lil shorty a shooter—he a hitter. Yeah.”  So now everybody tryin’ to prove theyself now—16, 17, 18 year olds, that’s what they on now….

And it’s like, man, if something happen, ain’t nobody gotta tell them nothing. They just be thirsty [eager]. They be: “Yeah? Oh, we on it! Go get ’em! Go get ’em!”  You know what I’m sayin’?… Lil Folks over there ain’t tryin’ to hear nothing [about a peace treaty]. They just wanna gangbang…. Growin’ up, that’s what they think they gotta do to get by, I guess, in Chicago [on the] South Side—learn how to shoot.

Tragically, the only viable means by which gang members today might achieve a more esteemed status in the eyes of their peers is through death. In other words, like the perpetration of gang violence, violent victimization within the context of gang membership was likewise, and often to an even greater degree, viewed as honorable and as a symbol of solidarity. Gang members who have passed away—almost always due to gang violence, but occasionally as a result of a police shooting or even a car accident—are obsessively exalted by their comrades through a variety of practices that often take on a quasi-religious quality. These practices include, for example, swearing on the name of a deceased comrade in the course of routine conversation, organizing annual parties commemorating the date of a departed friend’s death and/or birthday, and co-naming one’s entire gang after a fallen member. The co-naming of a
gang after a deceased member, in particular, ensures that gang members are more celebrated in death than they are in life and clearly illustrates the efforts of gang members to cope with and make meaning of the all-too-frequent deaths of their young comrades—a fate they recognize may soon await them, as well. This practice is nearly ubiquitous among African American gangs on Chicago’s South Side and can be employed in a cumulative fashion so as to accommodate for an unlimited number of deaths within a gang’s ranks. The Terror Town/No Limit Muskegon Boyz gang, for example, has adopted at least four additional aliases based on the nicknames of fallen members: Roc Block, Cobi World, Fazoland, and Pistol Gang. Below, Carlos and Jabari describe the unmatched reverence in which gang members hold their departed comrades (see also the quote from Harold on page 134):

**Carlos:** If you a nobody—at the end of the day, don’t nobody wanna be a nobody out here, G. That’s why a lot of this shit goin’ on, you feel me? So a lot of mu’fuckas dyin’ over this shit. You really become somebody [when] you die, to me. Shit, you feel me? Mu’fuckas don’t be havin’ that name but if you dead or in jail, G, that’s when you got that name. When you out here, mu’fuckas be scared of you—they terrified of you, but, shit, you a nobody still, you feel me, until you died or you dead. That’s just how I look at that shit, G.

**Jabari:** It’s all blocks now. It’s, like, areas and shit now. Like, it used to be like, OK, well, this is this area—79th is this area. Now it’s everything got a “world” or “ville” or—or a “city” on it. After—soon as somebody die, they namin’ they block after this person. And everybody with this block—and it’s different niggas on this block, like, different gangs and all that shit…

Man, I’m cool with—I know y’all heard of Super City. We cool with Super City, then you got, uh, what else you got? You got a lot of world and cities, you know, Yummy Ville, Vernon, they Boobie World. I know all of those guys that passed away, you know? It’s just cliques now. Everybody namin’ they stuff after “world” and “cities”…

One of my big guys [got killed]. That’s why we got our name. His name was Rico, now we call ourselves Rico World…. Since Folks died, I’m, like, the heart of this shit—I keep this shit pumpin’. Not on no gangbangin’, makin’ noise and shit, shootin’ niggas and shit. I put in my work, but I keep it alive ’cause I’m so Rico World crazy. Like, that shit’s a part of me. You feel me, I wake up—like, anything you type on the Internet about Rico or Rico World or anything, I’m poppin’ up—I’m poppin’ dead up. I promoted that shit hard. As soon as Folks died, I made everybody [associated with the
gang] put “Rico Boy” or “Rico Girl” before they name [on their social media accounts]. I was the first one with that shit. Everybody liked how it sound, start doin’ it. Mu’fucka, a thousand niggas will tell you they started that shit. That man in that room [referring to his friend in the next room] will tell you I started that shit. On my mama. Like, it’s just real with me. I ain’t gonna be on no phony shit. I started G-Ville, 0-7-7[, as well]. That was my other homie, Goonie. He got killed two weeks before his birthday.

As described by Jabari in the quote above, social media also constitutes an essential platform through which gang members honor the memories of their departed friends, as does the amateur rap music being produced by increasing numbers of young gang members. Indeed, the rising use of social media and creation of rap music among Chicago gang members have fundamentally refashioned the city’s gang landscape in a number of essential ways that go far beyond tributes to fallen comrades. These themes are explored in the following section.

**Drill Music, Social Media, and the Persistent Power of Identity**

An examination of street gangs and gang violence in Chicago in the twenty-first century would be woefully incomplete without an exploration of the symbiotic role of rap music and social media in the lives of contemporary gang members and in the conflicts in which they are embroiled. Like all of the study findings presented in these pages, these developments must be understood within a broader sociohistorical context. In this case, the chief contextual factors shaping these dynamics are those related to rapid advancements in and increasing access to technology, including: the growing ubiquity of the Internet and devices by which online content can be accessed, particularly mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets; the soaring popularity of online social media platforms among young people; and the proliferation of inexpensive home studio equipment and handheld video cameras. Together, these trends have placed social media, amateur rap music, and homemade music videos squarely in the center of the public lives of today’s young gang members.
Increased access to personal computers, laptops, and basic recording equipment and software since the turn of the century has radically democratized the process by which music is recorded and disseminated. More specifically, cutting a record 20 years ago usually involved booking expensive time at a professional music studio and required a tremendous investment of time, effort, and money that generally limited such opportunities to a tiny number of particularly dedicated, gifted, moneyed, and/or connected individuals. Distributing a record to the public for consumption, moreover, was perhaps even more difficult and was generally accomplished through recording and distribution contracts with record labels. Today, on the other hand, technological advancements and reductions in cost have enabled essentially anyone with a computer, a microphone, and some basic software to create music on a personal computer and upload that music onto the Internet (see Harkness, 2014). This has led to the proliferation of rudimentary home studios and afforded unprecedented numbers of gang members the opportunity to create and disseminate, rather than simply consume, the rap music about which they have long been passionate (see also Hagedorn, 2008). In Chicago, this development has given rise to “drill music,” a subgenre of gangsta rap music created and popularized by young gang members/rappers from the city’s South Side. In effect, drill music is the sonic distillation of Chicago’s contemporary gang culture, with menacing production and gritty, often nihilistic lyrics that largely revolve around the daily realities of urban gang violence. Indeed, the genre gets its name from a Chicago slang term for a gang shooting. On one level, drill music’s predominant themes of gang violence, substance abuse, wanton materialism, and sexual conquest do not differ substantially from those found in other forms of popular gangsta rap over the last quarter century. Yet, drill music’s highly-specific accounts of actual violent events fundamentally distinguish it from typical gangsta rap, which tends to discuss violence in abstract,
impersonal terms. To be specific, drill rappers regularly reference shootings and killings that have actually taken place (or that subsequently take place) in their lyrics. Their musical boasts and taunts are directed at identifiable, real-life enemies, not hypothetical, nameless “haters” or “bitch-ass niggas.” This unprecedented specificity is likely driven by the reality that, overwhelmingly, these songs are not being recorded and released after these rappers have signed record deals and moved out of the ghetto, as is the case with most gangsta rap records; rather, these songs are being recorded while these rappers and their comrades are still living in poverty and actively embroiled in deadly gang wars. Stated differently, drill raps are not reflections on a harsh past contemplated from the comfort of success; they are real-time reports from the front lines of Chicago’s gang wars. Montrelle and Jabari explain these dynamics below:

**Montrelle:** They just using songs to talk shit to each other. Like, “Yeah we killed” so-and-so. “We caught Scooter on the seven, now that nigga sittin’ in heaven.” Or somebody said, “Fuck a Fathead, if he wasn’t lackin’ how the fuck he catch a fat head?” And then it’s other raps where they say—you know, Keef had a song sayin’, “OTF, that’s WIIIC City, Young Money, no 5-1, Lamron, 4-6 shit, sendin’ shots at 0-5-1.”99 That was—he said that, we was really throwin’ down [at war], you know?

**Jabari:** I do the music, but it’s just the music—like, I ain’t never heard so much music that entice you to kill somebody like that. You have rappers like 2Pac and Scarface talked about death, but they’re talkin’ about death in general. These guys…. namin’ all types of names [of specific enemies]. Your friend just died, now they talkin’ ‘bout they smokin’ your friend in a blunt.

But drill music is not only a reflection of Chicago’s contemporary gang culture; it also plays a prominent role in shaping this culture, as well. Essential to an understanding of this dynamic, however, is a recognition of the ways in which the explosion of social media has

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99 The lyrics referenced here are from Chief Keef’s song, “What I Claim” (Cozart, 2011). OTF stands for Only Trey Folks, or Only the Family, a reference to a number of allied Black Disciple gangs (or gangs that are predominantly composed of Black Disciples) on Chicago’s South Side, including WIIIC City, Young Money, Lamron, and 4-6. However, another gang with the moniker Young Money is an enemy of many of the gangs mentioned in this lyric, thus, Keef’s clarification that the Young Money gang with which he is allied is “no[t] 5-1,” and that he is, instead, “sendin’ shots at 0-5-1.” These numbers are references to 51st Street, along which lies the territorial heart of the enemy Young Money gang.
facilitated the popularization of drill music as well as the meteoric rise of a number of local drill rappers to national prominence. To begin, many gang members, like their adolescent and young adult counterparts the world over, are ardent consumers and producers of social media. For gang members who also rap, a major appeal of these online applications is that they provide an essential platform to promote their music, typically by linking or embedding YouTube videos of their songs on their Facebook profiles or in their Tweets and Instagram posts. Although some of these YouTube videos simply feature a static picture or series of pictures onscreen during playback, moreover, the rising affordability of handheld video cameras and video editing software has increasingly allowed rappers to shoot amateur music videos for their songs. These videos are typically filmed on location in the rapper’s neighborhood and feature their friends flashing gang signs and displaying firearms—in effect, providing a visual representation of the music itself. It is precisely this music–social media–video nexus that has facilitated the meteoric rise of drill music and its progenitors into the national spotlight over the last five years. Many of these prominent drill rappers hail from the same communities, grew up with, and/or move in the same gang circles as the participants in this study, including Chief Keef, who has roots in the Parkway Gardens Homes in Greater Grand Crossing; King Louie and Lil Jay, both of whom grew up in Woodlawn; and Young Chop and Team 600, who hail from Washington Park. The success of these as well as a handful of other Chicago drill rappers have fueled aspirations of similar success among many of the city’s young gang members, more and more of whom are trying their hand at rapping. Indeed, six of the 20 participants in this study reported that they were aspiring rappers. In the following passages, Terrence and Cassius describe these increasingly ubiquitous dreams of rap superstardom among Chicago’s youthful gang members.

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100 This may be an undercount of rap aspirations among study participants, as most participants were not explicitly asked about their involvement in making music.
Terrence perceptively places the explosion of such musical aspirations within the context of declining urban drug markets and associated opportunities within the underground economy.

**Terrence:** The cause of everybody wantin’ to rap now ’cause, of course, Chief Keef. He actually made it and they figure that’s the easy way out now, as far as [as opposed to] just goin’ to school and all that. As far as drug dealin’, they—the rapper now is the new drug dealer in our age. Basically, that’s how people get they money now. It’s not—on the South Side of Chicago, it’s not too much drug dealin’ goin’ on. Just mostly gangbangin’ and rappin’. So that’s what people be tryin’ to get they money from.…

The music, it come from Facebook [*laughing*]…. It fall into the Internet—the Facebook stuff. You know, they post they [music] videos on Facebook and everything on YouTube. Them the three main [ways] how they [distribute their music]—Internet things: YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

**Cassius:** These days, like, [*clearing his throat*] mu’fuckas just tryin’ to live like the rappers and shit. Not knowin’ they ain’t really livin’ like [they portray]. Well, some of ’em is, but not most of ’em. So everybody just tryin’ to—like, that rap shit really gettin’ to [influencing] mu’fuckas. So they tryin’ to live like that. They tryin’ to make that image, you know, like that’s them, all that type of shit…. It’s very impact[ful] on, like, the—especially the young mu’fuckas. That’s who they role models is [the rappers]…. That rap shit, it’s got the biggest impact on young mu’fuckas today in Chicago.

As described in the quotes above, the popularity of prominent drill rappers among Chicago’s young gang members has given these rappers a tremendous amount of influence on the city’s streets. To a certain degree, these rappers have stepped into the power void created by the shattering of the city’s street organizations and the eradication of their leadership structures (see also Hagedorn, 2015). Although the informal, indirect influence wielded by contemporary drill rappers stands in stark contrast to the official, unequivocal authority once exercised by formal gang leaders, much of the power possessed by both of these groups derives—or, in the case of former gang leaders, derived—from their ability to construct and promote powerful collective identities among their devotees. For former gang leaders, such identity construction

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101 Chief Keef has been the most successful of Chicago’s young drill rappers, signing a recording contract with prominent record label Interscope Records and releasing an album, *Finally Rich*, in 2012 that peaked at number two nationally on Billboard’s Top Rap Albums chart (Billboard, 2016).
was facilitated in a very intentional and comprehensive manner, primarily through the development of sacred gang literature, symbols, and rituals (see the discussion on pages 98–101; see also Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Conquergood, 1994, 1997; Hagedorn, 2008, 2015).

Conversely, the power of drill rappers in constructing and appealing to collective identity is largely unintentional and driven by emulation among gang members in other neighborhoods with whom these rappers and their gangs might have little or no actual contact. Consider, for example, Jabari’s account of the popularization of the “Insane” gang identity, which he credits to Lil JoJo, an 18-year-old rapper and member of Brick Squad, a Gangster Disciple set from Englewood, who was gunned down in 2012. In addition, Jabari describes this trend as a response to the proliferation of the “L’s” gang identity popularized by Lil Durk, a rapper from Lamron, a Black Disciple set in Englewood and a Brick Squad rival.102 As Jabari explains:

That Insane shit? Niggas been Insane, but they ain’t know what that shit was…. Niggas ain’t start claimin’ that Insane shit ’til they start hearin’ about JoJo and the BDs—all that shit. ’Cause the BDs came out with L’s. And then you got the Moes screamin’ that L’s. And then they cliqued up, now everybody just L’s, L’s, L’s. You got some GD’s that’s L’s, L’s, L’s, L’s. [Other] niggas “Die L’s”103—GDs is “Die L’s,” so they Insane. All the Folks [GDs] started fallin’ under the Insane act. JoJo came out like, “We Insane,” woo, woo, woo. And he GD for real. Like, he had the Folks behind him—shorty had the Folks behind him. And that’s how that it start pumpin’ up hard.104

To be clear, the conflict between Brick Squad and Lamron, as well as their respective allies, Tookaville and O-Block, did not start on record; it existed before any of the young rappers

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102 Lil Durk’s 2012 song “L’s Anthem” (Banks, 2012) promoted L’s as an identity derived from Lamron, the name of Durk’s Black Disciple set, as well as Love, Life, and Loyalty, the three chief principles espoused by the Black Disciples. L’s was subsequently adopted as an identity by a range of other gangs who ascribed to the term their own meanings, including a number of gangs located near the South Side’s elevated train tracks, known as the “L,” and various Outlaw gangs, for whom L represents the corresponding letter in Outlaw.

103 In Chicago gang parlance, “die,” used in this fashion, constitutes a statement of opposition to the particular gang identity or symbol that immediately follows its use.

104 Lil JoJo made references to being “Insane” on a number of his songs, most notably “Put in Work” and “Real Dope,” both found on his posthumously-compiled 2012 mixtape, JoJo World (Coleman, 2012). In addition, in the video for his most popular song, “3HunnaK (BDK),” a record on which he assails a number of Black Disciple sets, he and a number of other individuals in the video can be seen flashing the Insane hand sign.
involved in the musical manifestation of this conflict began gangbangi—perhaps before they were even born. In this respect, the music released by rappers on both sides of this conflict, which extended to a number of their respective allies in nearby neighborhoods, was a reflection of ongoing gang warfare. Yet, as Jabari describes above, this music also had a profound impact on gangs outside of the actual Brick Squad and Tookaville versus Lamron and O-Block conflict being played out on record, as increasing numbers of South Side gangs adopted the simple, slogan-like identities espoused by these rappers—Insane, I’s, L’s, BDK (Black Disciple Killer), and GDK (Gangster Disciple Killer). In turn, these identities functioned as the basis for new, renewed, or intensified hostilities among a number of these gangs. In other words, amateur songs and videos recorded by a handful of teenage gang members/rappers addressing conflicts and matters of identity specific to their own gangs have inadvertently redrawn gang battle lines throughout much of Chicago’s mid-South Side.\footnote{It is unclear whether this trend has extended beyond this region, as nearly all study participants hailed from this region of the city. The two study participants from Roseland, a community on the Far South Side, moreover, did not report this music having the same types of effects on gang dynamics in their neighborhoods.} Below, Zeke and Rasheed describe this dynamic:

**Zeke:** Like, last year, we wasn’t really into it with them [an adjacent GD gang]. But then once what’s his name—you probably know him, they call him JoJo or something—him. When he died, they wanted to get all on that like, “Aw, BDK,” all that stuff like that. We wasn’t never on that like that, like, “GDK,” and sayin’ all that stuff.… They started that.…

[Before that, our beefs were just] on the personal level. Yeah, like that. And now, it’s just cliques.… Like, the year—what’s this, 2013? [In] 2012, it wasn’t no beefin’ or anything like that. But, like, 2011 and on back, we ain’t shoot at them all the time. They’ll come down there with they clique and we’ll box [if there was an issue]…. And now, all of them BDK now. That’s really how it really got like how it is now, when JoJo died, really…. [That] just kicked [things] off, like, all of them wanted to be BDK now.

**Rasheed:** With this GDK, BDK shit, these mu’fuckas who into it, I don’t know they ass from nothing but music. You feel me? So, it’s like all the GDs and the BDs who wasn’t even fuckin’ with no music shit, they followin’ y’all [the rappers], know what I’m sayin’? They followin’ suit just off the strength they lookin’ up [to the rappers]. You got them
bars [raps], you got niggas [followers], know what I’m sayin’? So they damn-near sendin’ the whole Nation off just off some personal shit, though. Off some personal beef, they sendin’ they whole—they done just fucked some shit up. Since that Lil JoJo shit, man, it’s been “GDK,” “BDK.” Before that shit, everybody was “Die 5.”

They was together. It’s like, they was against us, know what I’m sayin’?

Like the drill music promoted on its platforms, social media effectively serves as an extension of Chicago’s gang landscape, both reflecting and shaping real-world gang conflicts. Indeed, the BDK and GDK slogans re-popularized in drill raps became “trending terms on Twitter, showing up in thousands of tweets” (Austen, 2013). In more general terms, like hostile exchanges that take place in person, confrontations on social media can lead to real-world gang conflicts or add fuel to existing gang wars. Indeed, as social media has become a key space within which today’s young gang members fashion and present their personal and gang identities (see, for example, the quote from Jabari on page 172; see also Pyrooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015), hostile and disparaging comments made online are generally treated no differently than those made in person. Consider, for example, the following comments from Antonio:

Facebook thuggin’? [Dismissively] Pssh. I seen a couple of mu’fuckas get they shit beat in ’cause of shit like that, man. For real…. It’s bad ’cause you get on Facebook arguin’, “Oh, I’ll do this, I’ll do that.” Mu’fuckas come check your résumé, and shit ain’t fallin’ through like niggas said it was gon’ fall through. It ain’t good. It’s bad for people, man. That’s why I say if you gon’ get on Facebook and thug and do all that shit, man, make sure you in a secluded area—PC [protective custody] or some shit. For real, mu’fucka catch your ass, it’s goin’ down.… Don’t write a check with your mouth that your ass can’t cash. For real ’cause I’m talkin’ ’bout, you can call me PLS [the name of a check-cashing chain]—I’m cashing all checks, for real [laughing]….

Like I said, I done caught a couple mu’fuckas like that, man. And I try to tell people like, “Look, you only as real as your name is, man.” For real. If you go on the Internet and puttin’ up pictures of fake guns and shit and you get into it with a mu’fucka, then they pull out some real hardware on your ass, and then you can’t do shit but, “Oh, it was—it was fake. It was just Facebook.” Shit ain’t fake, man, for real. ’Cause I’m talkin’ ’bout, I done seen mu’fuckas get rolled on for shit like that. And that’s just how shit goes.

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106 A slogan used to express opposition to the Black P. Stones and other gangs that have traditionally been a part of the People coalition, which employs the five-pointed star as its primary symbol.
Although social media provides gang members the otherwise rare opportunity to communicate with their rivals in a manner beyond the physical violence that typifies their in-person interactions, such online typically consists of denigrating remarks, boasts about enemy casualties, and threats—that is, comments that only serve to further intensify existing animosities. As Marco remarked, “Social media…. that let the opps get in touch with you. That let the opps talk shit. ’Cause if we was face-to-face, wouldn’t be no talking, you know?” Terrence explained these dynamics in a similar fashion and also noted that the constant contact facilitated through social media often serves to sustain and escalate conflicts that had not already reached the point of serious violence:\textsuperscript{107}

\textbf{As of now, yeah, that’s the main thing [laughing]. That’s where most of the gangbangin’ happen at…. on the Internet. People don’t hang outside like that no more ’cause of the violence or ’cause of all the shooting. People don’t wanna be outside like that. So most of they word bein’ passed to each other happen over the social media. And Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, that’s where most of the arguments happen. So yeah, that plays the biggest role….}

\textbf{Nowadays, people argue so much on Facebook that people sit at home and actually be mad at this person, and when they see ’em, they don’t just wanna fight ’em no more. They wanna kill ’em [clapping his hands]; they wanna shoot ’em…. It allows it [conflicts] to escalate ’cause you have contact with the person, as far as [as opposed to] I got into it with this person, I ain’t seen him in two, three months now—I ain’t had no contact with him. As far as I got into it with this person and he talkin’ shit to me every day on the Internet. So that escalates it. As far as waitin’ for three months to see him again, you prolly done calmed down [clapping his hands], whatever, and just leave it alone. So, to me, yeah, I think it really have something to do [with the violence]—Facebook and all that, social media.}

\textbf{In some instances, however, social media plays a more direct, facilitative role in gang warfare. For example, pictures and videos posted on social media platforms can help gang}

\textsuperscript{107} Participants also identified a number of additional factors that they argued actually made conflicts on social media more likely than in-person disputes to escalate to the point of eventual violence, including: the supremely public nature of online communications, which makes saving face potentially an even greater priority than usual; the ability of third parties to mediate such confrontations is severely limited, as comments are posted from the isolation of individual accounts as opposed to within a conventionally social context; and the consequences of online confrontations are likely to be delayed relative to in-person exchanges, thereby increasing the likelihood that people will act more antagonistically than they otherwise might.
members identify their rivals more quickly and from greater distances on the streets, as they become familiar with clothing, shoes, jackets, and hats worn by specific enemy gang members. Similarly, through shared pictures and public comments, social media can help gang members identify allies of their enemies who, by way of such alliances, may also represent a potential threat. Yet, perhaps the most immediate way that gang violence is facilitated by social media is through the real-time, public communication of a user’s location through the use of location “tags,” the instantaneous uploading of pictures and videos in which a particular setting is apparent, and public postings in which one’s current location is referenced. Such information can be used by gang members to quickly locate rivals for the purpose of committing acts of violence. Indeed, rapper Lil JoJo was gunned down shortly after sending a tweet openly taunting a number of rival gang members and indicating his location, in effect, stating that if these rivals were so tough and wanted to harm him, they could easily find him. Well, someone did, and it appeared that they used social media to help them do so (Austen, 2013). Below, Carlos describes a similar situation involving a friend of his, who was killed shortly after posting his location in a social media conversation with a female companion, who apparently may have been the girlfriend of any enemy gang member. As Carlos explains:

I don’t even be up on that shit like that, like, that Instagram, none of that [social media]…. You settin’ yourself up for failure [by using social media], ’cause you know that they [your enemies are] watchin’, you feel me? So if you say, “I’m on 75th and Vincennes,” Folks and them [an enemy gang is] on 76th and Union. That’s right off Halsted, you feel me? They: “Folks down the street, bro. Come on, let’s check it out one time.” And he really out there, you know what I’m sayin’, if you ain’t pump-fakin’ [lying about where you are], shit, you dead—it’s over for you….

Shit, my homie, YG, like I say, on that Instagram shit, you feel me? That’s another reason why I don’t do that shit ’cause females will get you. He [YG] fuckin’ with a bitch, but her whole boyfriend is a opp, you feel me? He a whole opp! So she—you fuckin’ on her, but she’ll go back: “Yeah, I ain’t gon’ stunt [lie], we fucked, but this where he be at,” such-and-such. You know what I’m sayin’? That opp nigga don’t give no fuck about that bitch, you feel me? It’s probably plenty of bitches he over there he
fuckin’ with. No tellin’! We don’t [even] know who he is, you feel me, we just know he a opp—he from that side. So, man, my homie, shit, he was talkin’ to that bitch on Instagram, tellin’ her where he was and shit like, “Oh, I’m finna come see you.” And all the time, the opps had rolled past… while he was on the corner already. I had seen the truck, but I had just pulled off. I should’ve told him hop in the truck with me, G. But they—I was goin’ to do some other shit, man. Soon as I pulled off, I heard shots. And I pulled back up, he laid out. I’m like, “Fuck!” Like, man, he fuckin’ with that bitch, man. So now it just been “shots fired” all day [Carlos and his comrades have intensified their violence against these enemies].

Like Carlos, a number of participants stated that they believed using social media to be hazardous or foolish due to the potential of making oneself a target of violence and/or due to the increasing online surveillance of law enforcement. Other participants disparaged what they perceived as Internet posturing, noting that online boasts and tough talk do not necessarily reflect one’s capacity to actually “handle [their] business”—that is, commit acts of violence when a situation necessitates doing so. These criticisms, however, generally did not dissuade participants from using these social media platforms. For study participants, the ability to publicly display one’s identity and “let mu’fuckas know what [you] be on” clearly outweighed the potential risks and shortcomings associated with the use of social media.

Summary and Discussion

Chicago’s contemporary gang wars are highly-localized vendettas arising from interpersonal animosities and driven by principles of group solidarity and collective liability. These gangs typically consist of around a dozen members and claim territories that amount to a few square blocks. Much of the violence in which these groups are engaged occurs between gang members who identify with the same traditional street organizations but whose loyalties now lie with their neighborhood comrades, regardless of their organizational affiliations. Indeed, neighborhood ties and personal relationships have become the sole delimiters of gang violence in the city today, as anyone outside of a gang’s immediate circle is typically viewed as a potential
enemy. Within such a provincial, uncertain, and hazardous context, many gangs are creating informal alliances with their counterparts with whom they share personal relationships and/or common enemies. This practice, known as “cliquing up,” provides today’s gangs with crucial backup but also tends to expand their pool of enemies and introduces the possibility that they might be held accountable for the actions of their allies, even if they object to those actions.

Increasing the likelihood of such scenarios is the fact that each individual gang member today possesses the autonomy to engage in violence at his own discretion, not only within the context of active gang wars but also with respect to breaking existing peace treaties and sparking new conflicts. Despite the fact that such actions have ramifications for the entire collective, however, the paradigm of autonomy among Chicago’s modern black street gangs means that no member has the authority to stop, coerce, or discipline the use of violence by another member. This dynamic has made contemporary gang violence increasingly volatile. The ascent of a number of young “drill” rappers from Chicago, moreover, has led to increasing numbers of gangs adopting the antagonistic, slogan-like identities espoused by these rappers in their music and effectively redrawn battle lines throughout much of the city’s mid-South Side. Indeed, today’s gang conflicts are also being played out over social media platforms, which constitute crucial spaces where young gang members fashion and display their identities and where animosities are sparked, intensified, and, on occasion, where actual violence is facilitated.

Gang violence in Chicago today, then, is fundamentally different in nearly every respect from the top-down, citywide gang wars waged over drug profits, power, and ideological rivalries during the 1990s (Hagedorn, 2015; Popkin et al., 2000; Venkatesh, 2000). It is also different in important respects—for example, structure, purpose, and/or group dynamics—from the gang violence that characterized previous periods in Chicago’s gang history, as detailed in the
literature review, including the territorial battles of the early-twentieth century (Diamond, 2009; Thrasher, 1927), the ethnoracial violence of the mid-twentieth century (Diamond, 2009; Suttles, 1968), the recruitment wars of the 1960s (Cooley, 2011; Dawley, 1992; Keiser, 1979), and the ideological conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s (Hagedorn, 2015; Perkins, 1987). In each of these cases, the nature of the violence in which these gangs were involved constituted an extension of the character of the city’s gangs during these respective eras. Both these gangs and this gang violence, moreover, were fundamentally shaped by the broader sociohistorical contexts of these periods. These arguments have been delineated over the course of the last three chapters with respect to the current state of Chicago’s street gangs and gang violence within the city.

As this has demonstrated, gang violence—like street gangs themselves—must be understood as fundamentally dynamic. Any serious attempt to understand this violence, therefore, must be both rooted in a contextual analysis of gang history and placed within a broader sociohistorical framework. Claims to definitive, universal understandings of gang violence (see, for example, Kennedy, 2011), like similar claims about street gangs, are necessarily limited and ultimately flawed. Many of the issues associated with such invariables perspectives on street gangs were discussed in the previous chapter. The following chapter will elaborate on that discussion, particularly with respect to the effects of these views on policies and programs designed to address street gangs and gang violence.
VIII. FINDINGS: ADDRESSING STREET GANGS AND REDUCING VIOLENCE FROM THE STREETS UP

The argument for understanding street gangs and gang violence as dynamic, historical phenomena presented over the preceding chapters has important implications for devising effective strategies to address these issues. As will be discussed in greater detail below, the sweeping social reforms and cultural shifts needed to ameliorate the oppressive conditions that make street gangs an attractive form of resistance for alienated urban youth (see Chapter 4) are highly unlikely. In the absence of such drastic changes, variations in the nature of street gangs and the violence in which they are involved across time and place mean that policies, programs, and other efforts designed to address these issues must be rooted in critical, empirical, and historical understandings of them as they exist within a particular context. This inductive, bottom-up approach represents a sharp departure from the deductive, top-down strategies typical of most gang intervention and violence reduction models that treat these phenomena as static and invariable. These models, therefore, tend to reflect the assumptions and ideologies of those involved in their design, rather than the realities of the issues they are ostensibly designed to address. Law enforcement and criminal justice officials, for example, view gangs as a criminal issue to be addressed through suppression, coercion, and incarceration. Psychologists, on the other hand, understand gangs as collections of psychologically damaged individuals in need of various types of therapeutic interventions. As the following adage commonly attributed to Mark Twain fittingly muses, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

This chapter, then, offers recommendations for addressing street gangs and gang violence in Chicago rooted in an empirical understanding of these issues as they exist today. Like the findings presented in the preceding chapters, the voices of gang members themselves serve as the
cornerstone of this analysis. Gang members are the ones losing their lives to gang wars and struggling to make sense of an existence seemingly characterized by marginalization and hostility at every turn. More than anyone else, they know what they need—and what they do not need—to help them turn their lives around. As such, it is their perspectives and experiences on these issues that must be heard, interpreted, and heeded. Employing this grounded, inductive approach, the first section of this chapter presents a critique of two highly-touted approaches to reducing gang violence that have been used in Chicago as well as a number of other cities. This section will be followed by a discussion of recommendations for moving efforts to address gangs and reduce violence in more promising directions.

**A Critical and Empirical Appraisal of Popular Approaches to Addressing Gang Violence**

The findings from this study call into question a number of popular approaches to addressing street gangs and gang violence as they relate to these issues in present-day Chicago. Although these findings challenge the relevance and utility of a number of popular approaches to these issues, such as zero-tolerance policing and the use of gangs and violence as a pretext for waging the War on Drugs in marginalized communities of color (see also Phillips, 2012), this section focuses on critiques of two specific approaches to gang violence reduction: pulling levers policing and the Cure Violence model. These two strategies are currently being implemented in Chicago as well as in various cities across the country, and each has been peddled as the proverbial silver bullet that will end urban violence not only in Chicago, but across the country and world. The following critiques, however, are rooted in the uncovering of the contradictions and inconsistencies between the assumptions underlying these strategies and the current realities on Chicago’s streets and study participants’ actual experiences with these programs.
Pulling levers policing and deterring violence. Pulling levers was a policing approach developed in Boston during the 1990s with the express goal of deterring violent offending among members of local street gangs (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001; Kennedy, 1997). Since its development, the approach has been implemented in approximately two dozen additional U.S. cities (Kennedy, 2011). The pulling levers strategy operates on the assumption that the vast majority of serious violent crime is committed by a relatively small number of individuals who routinely engage in a wide range of other criminal behavior and belong to tight-knit networks of like-minded peers—that is, gangs—who are collectively engaged in conflicts with other such peer groups. After local law enforcement identifies those individuals and gangs perceived to be most heavily involved in serious violence, members of these gangs are then called together for a meeting, referred to as a “call-in.” During these call-ins, representatives from various local and federal law enforcement agencies and prosecutors’ offices delineate the collaborative pulling levers violence deterrence strategy, which Kennedy (2011), the chief architect of the approach, summarized as follows:

When a gang kills someone, or shoots guns, or terrorizes the neighborhood, this group steps in. We’ll focus on everyone in the gang. We’ll arrest drug dealers and shut the market down. We’ll serve warrants. We’ll call in probation and parole. Nobody’s going to smoke a joint or drink in public, nobody’s going to have any fun…. It’s up to you whether you get this attention. This group, no violence, no harm no foul. It’s not a deal, it’s a promise. Somebody else might come get you for dealing drugs, you take that chance. We go where the violence is. (p. 65)

As a means of deterring gang violence, in other words, local and federal law enforcement and criminal justice officials “respond to incidents of serious gang violence by… ‘pulling every lever’ available on the gang or gangs in question” (Kennedy, 1997, p. 462). Such sweeping,
swift, and severe legal sanctions are designed to weaken or eradicate gangs who persist in their use of violence despite warnings to the contrary. Through the continued use of call-ins, successful prosecutions of violent gangs are advertised to other groups as examples of the high costs associated with noncompliance. Pulling levers on all members of a gang, moreover, represents an attempt to use the principle of collective liability that normally works to fuel gang violence in order to prevent it: if one member shoots a rival, every member will face intensified police scrutiny and an array of suppressive legal sanctions. In theory, gang members will exercise social control over one another, discouraging their peers from committing acts of violence that will bring about serious collective legal consequences (Kennedy, 2011).

The Chicago Police Department (CPD) has been employing the pulling levers approach in an attempt to reduce gang violence in the city since at least 2010. Unfortunately, the strategy has had no discernible impact on levels of homicide in Chicago: since 2010, the city has averaged 455 homicides per year; for the five-year period from 2006–2010, the average was 467 (City of Chicago, 2016b). Although it is beyond the scope of this discussion to identify the precise reason(s) why pulling levers has failed to reduce violence in Chicago, the analysis presented in the preceding chapters suggests that this failure can be attributed, at least in part, to a fundamental misreading of the current nature of the city’s black street gangs and the violence in which they are involved. More precisely, the horizontal structure of today’s gangs and the fierce ethos of resistance and personal autonomy so central to their individual and collective identities severely limit the potential efficacy of a violence reduction strategy based on coercion and social control. Not only are there no longer any gang leaders capable of controlling violence, but gang members today categorically reject the notion that anyone, even their closest comrades, can tell them what or what not to do, with respect to violence or any other matter. The
utter lack of awareness of these dynamics among law enforcement officials was apparent from their first call-ins, which were held with groups of purported “gang leaders” (Byrne & Ford, 2010). Cassius, having heard of these meetings, proffered the following critique, obvious to anyone with a working knowledge of Chicago’s streets: “The Superintendent of the Chicago Police Department—well, I think they tried this methods already, like, gettin’ some of the gang leaders together and shit, but it ain’t too many gang leaders left.”

CPD wisely abandoned their focus on alleged gang leaders at some point but have, nonetheless, persisted in their use of the pulling levers strategy, despite its dubious utility. A recent series of events, in particular, illustrates the utter futility of this strategy among gang members in Chicago today. Following a call-in on the city’s South Side in October 2015, meeting attendees from the Killa Ward Gangster Disciple set apparently followed Tracey Morgan, a member of the rival Terror Dome Black P. Stones and a fellow meeting attendee, shooting at the truck in which he and his mother were travelling, killing him and wounding her in the process. The shooting occurred less than a mile from where the call-in was held (Gorner, 2015). A series of retaliatory shootings took place over the following months, resulting in the injury or death of at least a half-dozen individuals on either side of the feud. The casualties included the girlfriends of two gang members as well as Tyshawn Lee, the nine-year-old son of an alleged Killa Ward member, whose horrific execution in a South Side alley thrust violence in Chicago back into the national spotlight (Botelho, 2015; Pérez-Peña, 2015; Sweeney & Gorner, 2015). In short, gang members in Chicago are apparently so unmoved by the threat of pulling levers that they are not even deterred from shooting one another immediately after leaving a call-in! Even more astonishing is the fact that a series of successful prosecutions of Killa Ward

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109 During the first meeting, the ostensible gang leaders in attendance showed their disdain for the pulling levers message by simply walking out of the meeting.
members using the pulling levers strategy had previously been touted during these meetings as
the defining example of the approach’s effectiveness. As Marco, who had attended a call-in as a
parole requirement, explained:

I had went to a parole meeting with, um, who is the head of the police?… Yeah, with
him [Garry McCarthy, former Superintendent of CPD]. I saw him in person, you feel
me? I was like, “Damn, this the nigga I see on TV all the time.” But I was at
Washington Park. It was me and a whole bunch of other parolees, you know, from all
different ‘hoods and stuff. He was tellin’ us to stop the violence because he said about
some new law called accountability and stuff. And, basically, sayin’ if me and you [are
in the same gang, and] you went on a drill [gang shooting], right, and you kill somebody.
I ain’t got shit to do with it; I was at the crib [at home] the whole time. But I know you
killed somebody, and I ain’t sayin’ nothing. And then he was tellin’ us that he gon’ start
takin’ people to jail for that. You know?

He was talkin’ about a whole bunch of stuff, man. Like, he put a picture up there [in
front of the group], right? He said, “You see this guy? He’s one of the Killa Ward GDs,”
woo, woo, woo, woo, woo, you know, that’s the area they was focused on. He had one
picture. And then he had that picture, then they showed his rappie [partner in crime], you
feel me? He was like, “This is who he’s locked up with. He’s also from [Killa Ward].”
And then he pulled up some more pictures. And then he say, “Look at their arrest records
and the locations.” And I’m seein’ they all within Killa Ward area, and that’s how [the
police] know they with the shits and stuff [that they are members of that gang]. And
then, before I know, it’s, like, 20 people on this board and stuff, you know? And he’s
like, “If y’all do—if y’all block be under the radar, this is how it be for your area. So I’m
tellin’ y’all put down the guns because [otherwise this will happen to you].” And then he
sat down, and then the head of the FBI—somebody like that—came to talk. He’s like,
“Hold up. My name is,” woo, woo, woo, “I represent the FBI.” Then he got to talkin’
about some shit. And then somebody else came up there talkin’ about the safe haven lil
act—when you get out the joint, the lil paper you sign. He got to talkin’ about that, you
know? He’s like, “Yeah, if you got a gun on you now, that’s five years in the feds
[federal penitentiary],” and stuff like that.…

All they was talkin’ about is how they was gonna lock our ass up, you feel me? That’s all
they kept talkin’ about—years, years. And then dude was like, “And you know what
happens when we give you life [in prison]? We give you some more years!”
[Participant and interviewer laughing]. He’s just talkin’ ’bout years and years. It really
had me thinkin’ like, “Damn, man, they got something for us,” you feel me? But
mu’fuckas still out here takin’ these risks and shit, you know?… It hasn’t stopped, shit. I
don’t think it’s ever gon’ stop, bro. That’s crazy.

Clearly, despite incarcerating a number of their members, the pulling levers approach did
not eradicate, or even debilitate, Killa Ward. Unlike in many other cities, gangs in Chicago have
long been institutionalized in the city’s poor neighborhoods (see Hagedorn, 2008), regenerating themselves in spite of such disruptions and, seemingly, even in spite of the fundamental transformations they have undergone since the dawn of the millennium. The intense paradigm of resistance and autonomy within Chicago’s contemporary black street gangs, moreover, suggests that the pulling levers approach is ill suited to address the city’s persistent gang violence. Indeed, Marco reported that the strategy’s touted call-ins had no effect on his and his peers’ participation in violence, as they remained embroiled in a number of violent gang wars and had been involved in several shootings since that meeting. Finally, as noted above, the approach has had no demonstrable effect on levels of violence in Chicago in more than a half-decade. Despite its reported success in other cities (Braga et al., 2001; Braga & Weisburd, 2015; Kennedy, 2011; but see Braga & Weisburd, 2011), then, an obvious mismatch between some of the fundamental assumptions of the pulling levers strategy and the realities on Chicago’s streets appears to have neutralized its potential efficacy in that city.

**Cure Violence and the public health approach.** Cure Violence (formerly known as CeaseFire) is a Chicago-based violence reduction organization whose model has been implemented in nearly three dozen cities throughout the United States and across the world. Founded by Gary Slutkin, a physician and epidemiologist, the Cure Violence model treats violence as an epidemic and approaches violence reduction using the same three components public health experts use to fight infectious diseases: “1) Interrupting transmission of the disease. 2) Reducing the risk of the highest risk [individuals]. 3) Changing community norms” (Cure Violence, 2016; see also Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). More specifically, the first component of this model involves the detection and interruption of potentially violent incidents through working with victims of violent events and their friends and family members to
prevent retaliation as well as through the mediation of ongoing conflicts. The model’s second component entails identifying those at highest risk for involvement in violence, working with them to change their understanding of violence, and connecting them to resources that can help them desist from engaging in acts of violence. The third component involves developing working relationships with local stakeholders in order to spread the message that violent behavior is unacceptable. Cure Violence employs former gang leaders to implement this model, reasoning that these individuals constitute “credible messengers” (Skogan, Hartnett, Bump, & Dubois, 2008; p. 3-1) among current gang members, who are the target of the model’s first two components.

Yet, in spite of the organization’s presence in 18 of Chicago’s most violent communities for more than a decade as well as its claims to “large statistically significant reductions in violence” (Cure Violence, 2016), the model’s impact on violence in Chicago remains unclear, as the city’s homicide rate has remained relatively stable for the entire time that Cure Violence has been in operation (City of Chicago, 2016b; FBI, 2016).\textsuperscript{110} Like the critique of the pulling levers strategy offered above, a conclusive explanation of Cure Violence’s apparent inability to reduce levels of violence in Chicago is beyond the scope of this study. Like the discussion above, however, findings from this study offer important insights into current realities pertaining to gangs and violence that may be working to limit the model’s effectiveness. Gang violence today, for example, is often spontaneous, arising from the expressive impulses of young gang members as opposed to the strategic orders of gang leaders. In increasing numbers of gang shootings, there is no specific precipitating factor or provocation, only seething, longstanding hostilities that boil over in an often volatile fashion (see participants’ accounts of such impulsive

\textsuperscript{110} For a discussion of the mixed results associated with evaluations of the Cure Violence model in Chicago and beyond, see Papachristos (2011).
violence on pages 166 and 169–170). Predicting or, in Cure Violence parlance, detecting potentially violent events under such circumstances can be next to impossible, even for outreach workers with eyes and ears in the streets. Without being able to detect potential violence, then, it is impossible to interrupt these events. In addition, the autonomy of individual gang members today limits the potential efficacy of conflict mediation, as the impulsive, unilateral actions of one gang member can and often do break established peace treaties that all other members on both sides may have supported. Thus, for the mediation of an ongoing gang war to be successful, such an intervention would have to convince every single person involved in a conflict on both sides to agree to a permanent peace. If gang members themselves are unable to do so among their own closest comrades, it seems unlikely that the efforts of a street worker would be any more effective.

Furthermore, although Cure Violence hires former gang leaders due to their perceived legitimacy among young gang members, the findings from this study suggest a number of issues with this strategy. One of these issues is that, in many cases, former gang leaders are not viewed as credible in the eyes of current gang members. Indeed, it was precisely a crisis of legitimacy among coercive and exploitive gang leaders that led to the internal rebellions within Chicago’s black street organizations that ultimately shattered them and eradicated their leadership structures. Thus, today’s young gang members are typically uninterested in, if not intensely opposed to, taking advice or direction from former gang leaders. In fact, included in the home video version of The Interrupters (Kotlowitz & James, 2011), an acclaimed documentary film that details Cure Violence’s efforts to reduce violence in Chicago, is a bonus scene not included in the final cut of the film that features an intense confrontation in which a young gang member accuses a former gang leader and Cure Violence worker of ordering the murder of his father.
Although it is unclear why the scene was ultimately left out of the film, it certainly complicates the film’s narrative of redemption and its portrayal of the organization’s street workers as incontrovertibly credible. Yet, the issues associated with looking to former gang leaders as credible messengers to young gang members is not limited to cases of such fiercely hostile worker-gang member dynamics. Below, for example, Rasheed and Lamont describe the disconnect between current gang members and former gang leaders, who, even under more favorable circumstances, wield precious little influence among young gang members today.

**Rasheed:** I honor that type of shit, ’cause they [former gang leaders] tryin’ to make the difference. But, shit…. they don’t got no control. They don’t got no control…. Like, mu’fuckas ain’t gon’—they probably listen to ’em so far. They gon’ respect ’em in front of ’em, but when he ain’t around, they gon’ do them, you feel me? Vice versa, you feel me: we gon’ respect our big homies and all that, but, shit, we gon’ do what the—ain’t no tellin’ what we’ll do, know what I’m sayin’?

**Lamont:** If you’ve been gone to jail for 30 years, you big Black Stone. I’m one of the young Moes; I’m 20. You get home, you join CeaseFire. You haven’t been in my community for 30 years. Yeah, you grew up, you put work in, you was there when the train tracks was around, they was doin’ the disco, condos wasn’t there, the old store was there. You could tell all them old stories, but it’s been 30 years. Now you comin’ in, tellin’ me, “Cease fire,” from somebody who I’m into it with who just came to my mama crib and stole six TVs up outta the crib and he Folks, and he this, he that. You can’t cease that. Right? So to say that a person who was once a part of a mob can cease something is a lie….

You know, that’s how older people think. You could tell they got that plan from an older person who said, “Naw, Chief and them…” I wouldn’t date it that far back because, you know, it’s a different date and time for which all of it occurred for which respect goes along…. But I can’t say—I’m 30, I been out of the hood for 15, 20 years. Shorty and them finna get a gun and go down to the other end, and *I’m* the one that stopped them from doin’ that? That’s amazing! How are y’all doin’ that?!

The Cure Violence model also fails to address—or even acknowledge—the oppressive conditions that breed street gangs and urban violence (see Chapter 4; see also Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 1988, 2008; Jankowski, 1991; Moore, 1978, 1991; Suttles, 1968, 1972; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988, 2002). Instead, the organization views violence as a “learned behavior” that
must be “eradicate[d]… us[ing] behavioral techniques that are based not on moralistic or sociological diagnoses, but on proven scientific findings” (Cure Violence, 2016). Yet, this statement contains a number of mischaracterizations that illustrate some of the model’s limitations. For one, sociology is a science—a social science. The architects and advocates of the Cure Violence model, however, apparently do not view the social sciences as “real” science and, thus, consider the “diagnoses” derived from social science research irrelevant to the reduction of violence. Although such a perspective is problematic on a number of levels, it is also inherently paradoxical given that the “behavioral techniques” the organization touts as the only viable, scientifically proven means of reducing violence were developed by psychologists, who are considered social scientists (Pavlov, 1927, 1955; Skinner, 1938; 1953; Watson, 1913).111 What’s more, social scientists are not the only ones making the case for the tackling of broader social issues such as racism, unemployment, poverty, and limited educational opportunities as part of a vital, holistic violence reduction strategy; public health researchers and organizations themselves are making these same arguments (Krug et al., 2002; Winett, 1998; World Health Organization, 2014)! Thus, while Cure Violence promotes a seemingly neutral view of violence as a behavior that can be learned and unlearned by anyone, it fails to interrogate why this behavior is apparently learned in some contexts with so much greater frequency than in others. Why, in other words, are Cure Violence’s efforts ostensibly needed in the poorest, most segregated communities in Chicago and not in the city’s affluent neighborhoods? This paradox was not lost on study participants such as Lamont, who took the organization to task for what he perceived as its narrow and reactive approach reducing violence:

Organizations like CeaseFire only come into the community when violence erupts. Who’s there in the community before violence erupts? Who’s advocatin’ for that

111 It is the work of social scientists from a variety of disciplines, moreover, that has built on the foundational work of the cited scholars (for example, see Mattaini, 2013).
community that the violence is about to erupt in to make sure that this community is receivin’ resources so no violence won’t erupt? Nobody!

In summary, in addition to its failure to address the social issues that lie at the heart of much urban violence, a number of factors related to the current nature of Chicago’s black street gangs and the violence in which they are involved appear to make the Cure Violence model ill-suited to address these issues within this particular context. These factors include the autonomy of individual gang members, the unpredictability of gang violence, and the dubious influence of former gang leaders on current gang members.

Redirecting Resistance and Engaging Gang Members in Prosocial Collective Action

Few gang studies or gang interventions ask gang members themselves what they think about the high levels of violence in their communities, their participation in such violence, or what strategies they think might be effective in reducing this violence. This is remarkable given that efforts to address street gangs and reduce gang violence are, by definition, designed to directly or indirectly change the behavior of active and prospective gang members. That many gang members yearn for peace in their neighborhoods, then, may come as a surprise to many; yet, 18 of the 20 participants in this study responded to a question about whether or not stopping gang violence was important to them in the affirmative. Although, at first glance, this position may appear paradoxical given gang members’ involvement in such violence, considering the toll that this violence takes on them, both as victims and as perpetrators, it appears more and more sensible. Indeed, no one has more to gain from the end of gang hostilities than gang members themselves. It is gang members who must constantly be on alert anytime they are outside, even in their own neighborhoods; who cannot walk or take the bus three blocks from their home in

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112 The other two participants indicated that they did not too much care whether the violence stopped or not, instead indicating that they were primarily concerned with their own safety and that of their loved ones, as opposed to the safety of the wider communities.
any direction because they are besieged by rivals; who are coping with post-traumatic stress disorder; who face daily harassment from and the prospect of brutality at the hands of police officers; who are being shot, killed, and incarcerated at alarming rates. Thus, in spite of the images of gang members as irredeemably pathological—or even sociopathic—so often promoted by the media, law enforcement, elected officials, and gang researchers, most gang members I interviewed wanted the violence to stop. They wanted a different life for themselves and their families. Consider, for example, the following quote from Marco, who describes the burden of having to cope with the trauma associated with the constant specter of violent victimization as well as his longing for peace:

Being outside [gangbanging], it comes with havin’ to worry about the police and the opps and stuff, so you in that mode [to use violence to defend yourself] already, you know? So, man, I just don’t see that shit stoppin’, bro. I don’t know. I wish it would, though. Sick of worryin’, you know? Like, me and the guys, sometimes we’ll just go downtown and shit, just to walk around ’cause it feel good not havin’ to do this all the time [looking behind him over each shoulder]. You know, that’s a habit—steady lookin’ over your shoulder on all these cars.…

But that shit need to stop, though, for real, so people could feel safe again, you feel me? ’Cause that’s a good feeling. ’Cause that’s why we be havin’ the peace treaties, man—niggas wanna feel safe and shit. But even with a peace treaty, you still gotta watch. Maybe he just want a peace treaty so we can be comfortable so we can kinda get us off our Ps and Qs so y’all could snake [betray] us, you know?…

The violence, it ain’t gon’ stop. It’s not, bro. I know it. I wish it would, though, ’cause it be so petty. But it’s like, people just—people be lost, man. People be lost in they own world—they own block, you feel me? Shit be petty as hell, man.

Yet, despite such sentiments, participants felt as though they lacked the resources and opportunities needed to transform their lives. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 4, participants unequivocally located their own personal experiences of marginalization, insecurity, and domination within the conditions facing their communities more generally, in the sense of both their local neighborhoods as well as their membership in the broader African American
community. From their perspectives, then, the prospect of personal transformation seemed
nearly impossible in the absence of community transformation. In other words, as long as
poverty, ghettoization, un- and underemployment, occupation-like policing, hyperincarceration,
public retrenchment, and private disinvestment continued to shape life in their communities, their
chances of making a life for themselves according to conventional standards as steadily-
employed, law-abiding, tax-paying citizens—a life for which they yearned—seemed like a cruel
and remote fantasy. The game of life, in their eyes, had been set up for them to lose in the
interest of maintaining a system of racial and class domination that serves the interests of the
powerful. The conditions within their communities that had given rise to gangs and violence,
then, were viewed less as an unintended byproduct of the globalized capitalist political economy
than as an integral component of it. Lamont and Rick, for example, explained their views on this
dynamic as follows:

**Lamont:** It’s part of how the system work. In order—prisons have become big business. Privatization of prisons have become big business. And what I mean by big business is people like Victoria’s Secret, American Express who are gettin’ their products made through prisons because it’s cheap labor. Instead of sendin’ it overseas, you don’t have to do that. You find a private prison for people who are on death row and don’t have any commissary who wanna make 25 cent an hour. You know, to where, when you get done workin’ 20 hours in a day, you just got five dollars. Right? And that five dollars in that day was good because I didn’t have anything at first. So that’s the one part of it.

The second part of it is judges need jobs. In order for judges to continue to have jobs, violence and everything else has to continue to erupt. Right? Police officers need jobs, judges need jobs, lawyers need jobs—prisons have to stay full. Politicians wanna stay in office, [so] there needs to be issues for people to work on. Right? So if they wanted to fix this problem, they could have been fixed it. We look at all of the other countries that we give packages of money to, to do this and do that and do this. If we gave Chicago a $10 billion package, the violence would automatically cease.

**Rick:** They already resulted to reducing the population. Shit, that’s what they doin’ right now. They lettin’ mu’fuckas kill each other. They want for the population to be reduced, man. They want mu’fuckas to kill each other. So they want this to happen so they—you know, they ain’t doin’ nothing but making jails bigger. You know, that’s all they wanna do. So I don’t even know what to tell him [the mayor, if he asked Rick about reducing
the violence]. I’d probably get mad, if anything, ’cause he the reason why the shit goin’ on…. They could’ve stopped this shit. They want this shit to be goin’ on…. 

[We] playing into the role! It’s all designed. Everybody fallin’ into place; they doin’ everything that they supposed to do. This is what they expected us to do, and we’re doin’ it. So, shit, we can’t do nothing now ’cause this is what we doin’ to ourself. They planned this out for us now, and now we playin’ the game for ’em.

The resignation evident in Rick’s lamentation that gang members “can’t do nothing” to alter the conditions affecting their lives and the role that they play in advancing their own self-destruction is a common sentiment among gang members. In other words, gang members recognize that their lives are shaped by various forms of oppression; however, they generally feel powerless to challenge and change this status quo. Yet, as other participants contended, it is precisely this paralyzing sense of despair that must be overcome in order to make possible the transformation of their lives and their communities. Antonio and Marco, for example, drew on the rich legacy of African American social protest and collective action in describing their recommendations for reducing violence in Chicago. Indeed, although the question to which they responded was framed in terms of advice they would give the mayor to address this violence, their responses, like Rick’s above, revealed the complete lack of faith they placed in the will of the mayor and elected officials more generally to take meaningful action toward this end (see also the discussion on pages 85–86). Grassroots organizing, activism, and social movement-building, then, represented the only means by which the social policies, programs, and reform efforts that they viewed as essential to improving their lives and the conditions in their communities might be secured.

**Antonio:** One person in a room full of thousands of people, you can’t hear them. But 1,000 people talkin’ over one person, you ain’t got no choice but to hear what the fuck they sayin’, especially if they all sayin’ the same thing. You gotta think about it. It’s about [pausing]… how many people—eight billion people in this world?… And only 10,000 people got enough motivation to start speakin’ up…. Come on, now. Not gonna work. Maybe a million, two million might be a better percentage. But, I mean, you got
some people that will open up they mouth and then when somebody say, “Shut your mouth,” they quiet. ’Cause you don’t wanna start a uproar…

So when people say, “Oh, we need a change”—“Get your ass up, go downtown, protest.” Let these mu’fuckas know what the fuck is goin’ on. But one person can’t do it, man, for real…. You gotta use your own voice to make everybody else hear you to join in. You feel me? Think about Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, all them, man. One person ain’t enough. You gotta have of a bagillion mu’fuckas come behind you…. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, what’s his name—Jackie Robinson, them some mu’fuckin’ heroes ’cause they spoke [pounding his fist on the table] they mind and did [pounding his fist on the table] what the fuck they had to do. They didn’t wait for nobody to give ’em no damn permission…

You can only penalize a person and look down on them for so long before eventually they make it up to where you at and take you out. For real.

**Marco:** Man! What would I do [to address the violence in the city]? I don’t know, man. If I was the mayor, I don’t know how I would reduce violence. But what I know I would do as far as the—like, OK, let me say it like this. Back in the 1960s, you know, black people was all together back then because we all basically had, like, a common enemy, though, it was, like, police brutality and shit, you know? So black people was always together. I always hear the old people say black people used to talk a lot and make sure everybody good and shit, you know, and it was, like, a community, you feel me? Mu’fuckas just gotta remember that, you feel me? It’s like people don’t remember where we came from, man, and yet, like, how we used to fight for our rights back then and shit. Now police do anything the fuck they want because we don’t got that same drive no more, you feel me? ’Cause the police be doin’ whatever; they be doin’ some crazy-ass shit, man. The police crazy as hell, man.

But I feel like the only thing that’d get everybody on the same page is if we had a common enemy, man. Like, say if you was to get into it with the police, though, you feel me? Like, that’d be different than gettin’ into it with niggas, though, ’cause it’s like, damn, that’s the police, though. Everybody hate the police, you know? That’d have to be the only way to get back on the same page—if it was back like the 1960s.

The argument presented by Antonio and Marco above, that gang politicization and collective social action represents the solution to gang violence, is almost entirely absent from research on street gangs and gang violence (but see Brotherton, 2015; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Hagedorn, 2008, 2015). Yet, it is highly consistent with the findings from this study in two ways. First, today’s gang members are acutely aware of their utter lack of prospects within Chicago’s current gang landscape. The street organizations of the 1990s and previous decades
have shattered and, along with them, the illusion of mobility in the drug business among young
gang members. Unlike the gang soldiers of previous eras (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Padilla,
1992), in other words, gang members today do not view gang membership and selling drugs as a
viable career path. In addition, young gang members have overwhelmingly rejected the
powerful gang ideologies of yesteryear as impractical, divisive, and supportive of the coercive
and exploitative organizational structures and practice that they rebelled against and eventually
overthrew. The influence of gang leaders and ideologies on youthful gang members have been
replaced with a commitment to intimate personal relationships rooted in principles of
egalitarianism and reciprocity. In short, many of the forces that may have worked against the
involvement of gang members in prosocial collective social action during previous periods have
been marginalized, if not eliminated entirely. Thus, the potential for engaging Chicago’s gang
members in such activity is greater today than at any historical moment since the 1960s, the last
time the city’s gangs were involved in social movements in any significant capacity (Dawley,
1992; Fry, 1973; Gellman, 2010; Hagedorn, 2008; see also Hagedorn, 2015).

In addition, the argument that involving gang members in grassroots organizing,
activism, and social movement-building can be used as a strategy to reduce gang violence is also
supported by the theory of gang resistance delineated in the preceding chapters. To reiterate,
street gangs function as a form of resistance to a variety of oppressive conditions and
experiences of adversity that permeate the lives of their members. Primary among these forms of
resistance is the provision of a resistance identity that helps gang members reclaim a sense of
dignity and self-worth in the face of social, economic, and political exclusion and racial and class
denigration (see, in particular, the discussion on pages 88–91). On one hand, then, these
resistance identities have placed gang members at odds with an oppressive social structure and
with the powerful actors they perceive as supporting and perpetuating this system. As Rick
highlighted in his quote above, however, through the promotion of internecine violence, these
resistance identities have also had a distinctly self-destructive effect and have further undermined
the social fabric within already-distressed communities. These multiple, conflicting implications
of gang resistance serve as an illustration of Castells’s (2010) argument that, like other forms of
identity, resistance identities are neither static nor are they inherently progressive or regressive;
rather, their nature and functions must be situated and analyzed within their sociohistorical
context. Indeed, as Hagedorn (2008) and Levenson (2013) demonstrated in their respective
historical examinations of Chicago’s Vice Lords and Guatemala City’s maras, resistance
identities within gang contexts are no different in their prosocial/(self-)destructive elasticity.

The challenge, then, as these dynamics pertain to addressing gang violence, involves
helping gang members refashion their resistance identities and the redirect their energies away
from gang warfare and toward prosocial collective action. Although a comprehensive response
to this challenge is beyond the scope of this research, the findings from this study offer insights
into a number of strategies that will likely play an essential role in any successful efforts toward
these ends.

First, any attempt to enlist gang members in grassroots organizing, activism, and social
movement-building must begin with concerted efforts on behalf of those seeking to work with
these young people to build meaningful relationships with them. Indeed, as the findings from
this study have demonstrated, there is nothing more important to gang members today than
personal relationships, which have superseded even traditional gang affiliations as the primary
basis for solidarity among contemporary gangs in Chicago. On one hand, developing these
relationships will not be easy, as gang members have so often been ignored and/or abused by
those charged with helping and protecting them, including their parents, foster families, teachers, social workers, and police officers. Recall, for example, the discussion in Chapter 4 in which participants lamented that even organizations ostensibly dedicated to working with at-risk youth often “don’t want to get their hands dirty” by working with actual gang members. Thus, building trusting relationships with gang members can take months of persistent effort and will likely require demonstrations of genuine commitment and care that may go beyond the parameters delineated in a job description. Furthermore, these relationships must be forged on the streets, where gang members spend much of their time and where those interested in working with them are often scared to go. On the other hand, however, most gang members are open to assistance, especially from those they feel have their best interest at heart, and most yearn for a viable alternative to gangbanging. Yet, their life’s experiences tell them that such assistance will likely never come, hence, their reticence in placing their trust in those who say they wish to help them. Below, for example, Montrelle explains the necessity of building strong relationships with gang members—and the hard work required to do so—as a precondition to working with them:

We have certain people trying to help us to change, but it’s gonna take more than that…. They just think comin’ to tell us—some dude will come tell us a one-time story about what he used to do. Or somebody just tellin’ us not to [gangbang]. It’s nothing that’s really benefitting us. It’s just a moment. That’s all it be. It’s been a moment. It’s nothing that’s really was life changing. So with these dudes now, they need to really care. They need to be out there with us…. That’s the only way y’all could get us to change our thinking.

Moving gang members toward prosocial collective action, however, will also require the development of a new form of critical consciousness in which the oppressive conditions shaping their lives and their communities are reinterpreted as historical and changeable as opposed to natural and inevitable. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, his seminal work on popular education
and social transformation, Freire (1970/2000) explained this *conscientização* and its implications for constructive social action as follows:

Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence: critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be “in a situation.” Only as this situation ceases to present itself as a dense, enveloping reality or a tormenting blind alley, and they can come to perceive it as an objective-problematic situation—only then can commitment exist. Humankind emerge from their *submersion* and acquire the ability to *intervene* in reality as it is unveiled. *Intervention* in reality—historical awareness itself—thus represents a step forward from *emergence*, and results from the *conscientização* of the situation. *Conscientização* is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence. (p. 109)

In general, as the analysis above and the analysis presented in Chapter 4 indicate, study participants and many other gang members are already engaged in reflecting upon their circumstances and have discovered themselves to be “in a situation.” Yet, gang members tend to view this situation as “a dense, enveloping reality or a tormenting blind alley” to which gang membership offers essential forms of resistance—but not the possibility of transforming this oppressive social order. The quotes from Antonio and Marco above, however, demonstrate that the seeds of a more fully formed critical consciousness that rejects the invulnerability of the unjust status quo exist within many gang members, as well. Indeed, as discussed at the end of Chapter 5, the internal rebellions that shattered Chicago’s black street organizations and the subsequent, radical refashioning of these gangs were only possible through the development of a critical consciousness among young gang members in which exploitive and coercive gang structures and practices were perceived as problematic and transformable (see, especially, the quotes from James, Carlos, and Jabari on pages 111–112). Lamont, who was working with a grassroots community organization and grew up in Woodlawn, a South Side community with a long history of grassroots organizing and action (Fish, 1973; Fry, 1973), suggested conducting civic education and engagement trainings as a means of demystifying the political process and
equipping gang members and other community residents with a blueprint for changing the conditions within their neighborhoods. The latent theory embedded in his recommendation largely reflects Freire’s description of *conscientização*.

You can’t reduce violence until you educate the people. And a lot of times the reason why people don’t want to educate the people is because politicians get put out of office when people really learn what civic engagement is. I would create workshops where people in the community can learn civic engagement. So, me as the alderman of that community, if I’m not doin’ my job, they can empower themselves to get me out of office because I want to be held accountable. Most people don’t teach people how to get a gun and shoot ’em, right, because I wanna rule and do whatever that I say do, or do whatever that I really wanna do. So I would do some civic engagement courses in the community.…. If you don’t know all of these things, then you don’t know where your resources are at within your community. If you don’t know what your alderman is, what ward you live in, then you don’t know none of these things.

Finally, politicizing gang members and involving them in constructive social action will necessitate helping gang members reimagine and reconstruct their resistance identities. As discussed above, these identities as they are currently constructed situate gang members in opposition to the oppressive status quo and its proponents, but do so in ways that are ultimately self-defeating and destructive to their communities. Yet, many of the more specific elements of these (self-)destructive resistance identities lend themselves to the construction of more prosocial forms of identification. The reconstruction of gang members’ resistance identities, in other words, would not necessitate the wholesale repudiation of their former gang identities—an unappealing and unlikely prospect for any group of people. Rather, organizers and activists could assist gang members in reimagining and reconstructing various elements of their identities in ways that move them away from (self-)destructive action and toward constructive action. Their identities as protectors of their communities, for example, while currently used to justify violence against members of rival gangs, might also be used to mobilize progressive grassroots organizing efforts and prosocial collective action. Their resistance to marginalization,
exploitation, coercion, and domination, moreover, could be redirected from its current, primarily adaptive, and street-focused manifestation toward a transformative resistance to the broader sources of these various forms of oppression. Perhaps rap music, which today’s gang members are increasingly involved in not only consuming but also creating, might play a role in this process. As discussed in the previous chapter, local drill rappers/gang members are held in tremendous esteem by their peers on the streets—even those from other neighborhoods. Indeed, although it is unclear whether young rappers in Chicago today will move away from the nihilism of drill music toward something more constructive and political,\(^{113}\) Zeke stated that he believed that these rappers represented the only hope for stopping gang violence in Chicago:

> Only person that probably can stop this—like, if Lil Durk and them and somebody from Brick Squad or something tell ’em like, you know, get them together and tell them like, “Man, we need to stop this.” And tell ’em—’cause this shit out here gettin’ crazy—tell ’em this shit needs to stop. That’s the only way I could probably see it stoppin’.

At any rate, part of this process of resistance identity reconstruction would inevitably involve helping gang members recognize the common ground that they share with members of rival gangs, particularly their shared conditions of oppression and the common sources of those conditions—their “common enemy,” as Marco put it. This would provide a basis for the transcendence of gang antagonisms and the redirection of gang members’ energies away from internecine violence and toward prosocial collective action.\(^{114}\) In this way, helping gang members refashion their resistance identities and engaging them in grassroots organizing and collective action holds the potential to reduce violence even beyond the reductions that would

\(^{113}\) Indeed, music has long played a role in social movements and in the development of politicized identities (Chang, 2005; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Hagedorn, 2008; Werner, 2006).

\(^{114}\) As discussed in the literature review, this was accomplished during the 1960s, when the Blackstone Ranger and East Side Disciples called a truce as part of their involvement with The Woodlawn Organization’s Youth Job Project and the Lords, Stones, and Disciples formed a coalition in their fight to integrate Chicago’s construction industries (Dawley, 1992; Fish, 1973; Fry, 1973; Gellman, 2010; Hagedorn, 2008). Contemporary gang dynamics, however, are very different than those of the 1960s, and this means that gang members’ involvement in prosocial collective action today will look very different than it did during that period (see below).
accompany the policies, programs, and reforms secured through such efforts. Again, the seeds for reimagining and reconstructing resistance identities that emphasize commonalities across gang boundaries are already present in many gang members, but they need to be cultivated on both sides of gang rivalries. Consider, for example, the following quote from Marco, whose earlier quotes called for gang unification through collective social protest around a common enemy. Below, in a remarkably perceptive display of empathy, he observes that he and one of his mortal enemies are, in essence, “the same nigga” and laments that they are not working together toward a mutually-beneficial peace.

I know how it feels to lose somebody, you feel me? That shit hurt, bro. That shit ain’t cool. And regardless, like, OK, it’s a lot of niggas I’d like to see die, right? But I know they got loved ones, too, that’s finna feel like I feel, you know?…

[Not only that], mu’fuckas got kids and stuff, you know? I just had a lil girl, she finna be four months on Thursday. She pretty as hell…. And this nigga named—like, the nigga who came me on my [social media] page and said, “Bitch-ass nigga.” He got a daughter, too, you know? And it’s like this: like, we the same nigga. He tryin’ to do [kill] me, I’m tryin’ to do him. But it’s like, damn, Folk. Now, in the back of my mind, I’m tryin’ to change, and I can change—I want to ’cause I got something to live for. But this nigga still doin’ the same shit, though. It’s like, I wonder how he feel. ’Cause I’ll take his ass out this shit. But it’s like, damn, I don’t want to, but if I have to, you feel me? ’Cause you got a lil girl and stuff, but you still playin’ these games. Niggas be crazy, man. Like, how you got a lil girl, right, but you still doin’ that type of shit, though? But even with me—I ain’t no hypocrite, though, I be thinkin’ about me, too. But [pausing]… I don’t know, man.

Indeed, Marco does not know. He does not know what the future will look like for his daughter or the daughter of his sworn enemy, both of whom may end up growing up without their fathers. He does not know how his enemy feels about the path of mutual destruction upon which they have both embarked. He does not know if building connections with his enemies in the name of solidarity, peace, and social justice is possible. He does not know, moreover, if anyone cares enough to help him try to do so. These are among the urgent uncertainties facing young gang members in Chicago today.
Summary and Discussion

The ways in which street gangs are understood fundamentally informs the creation of strategies to address them and the violence and other criminal activity in which they might (or might not) be involved. These understandings shape, among other things, the nature of the interventions designed to address these issues, the stakeholders involved in this design process, and who is charged with their implementation. The pathological view of gangs that dominates public discourse on this topic, for example, presupposes that the only logical and appropriate response to gangs involves police suppression and incarceration. Yet, despite a great deal of research demonstrating the limitations of this approach and, in many instances, its role in actually exacerbating the gang issue (see, for example, Greene & Pranis, 2007; Hagedorn, 2006, 2008; Klein, 1995; Levenson, 2013), suppression and incarceration remain the dominant responses to street gangs and gang violence in the United States. These heavy-handed approaches, however, are not the only ones that have failed to solve these issues; they are simply the least questioned and most persistently popular (see Klein & Maxson, 2006). On the other hand, this chapter explored the failure of two highly-touted and ostensibly proven violence reduction models to affect change in levels of violence in Chicago: pulling levers policing and the Cure Violence public health approach. Each of these models has been, and continues to be, promoted as the solution to gang violence, and proponents point to their allegedly unqualified successes in cities across the country and world as evidence of these claims (Cure Violence, 2016; Kennedy, 2011). While such claims of categorical success in other cities are dubious,115

115 As noted earlier, for a critical overview of the Cure Violence model, see Papachristos (2011). The authors of a meta-analysis of the pulling levers strategy, moreover, concluded that, although these studies indicated that the strategy was “associated with an overall statistically significant, medium-sized crime reduction effect…. the strongest program effect sizes were generated by evaluations that used the weakest research designs.” Furthermore,
these efforts have undoubtedly failed to have a substantive impact on reducing levels of violence in Chicago.

I have argued here that these failures can, at least in part, be attributed to the erroneous notion espoused by the architects and champions of these models that gang violence is invariable and that eliminating this violence within any context, therefore, simply requires the application of one of these supposedly fail-proof strategies. Indeed, the analysis presented over the course of the preceding chapters has demonstrated that street gangs and gang violence are not invariable, but, rather, are shaped in fundamental ways by the particularities of the sociohistorical contexts within which they exist at any given time and place. For a variety of reasons specific to the prevailing dynamics among Chicago’s black street gangs and the nature of the violence in which their members are involved, then, these one-size-fits-all strategies were and are ill suited to reduce contemporary gang violence in Chicago.

Yet, all hope for peace on Chicago’s streets is not lost. Indeed, in spite of their involvement in gangs and participation in violence, most of the participants in this study longed for peace. They doubted, however, that peace was possible given the current state of their communities and the dearth of meaningful prospects with which they and their young black counterparts in Chicago were faced. Moreover, participants believed that these conditions were the result of willful neglect, if not intentional design, and, thus, expressed no faith in the potential of the conventional political process to change them. The only viable means of transforming the oppressive conditions within their communities and achieving peace on the streets, in their eyes, involved collective social action aimed at securing the resources and reforms they viewed as preconditions for these transformations. These findings lend empirical, street-level support to

the authors concluded that “other complementary crime control mechanisms are at work in the focused deterrence strategies described here that need to be highlighted and better understood” (Braga & Weisburd, 2011, p. 323).
the argument made by Hagedorn (2015) in the conclusion to his historical study of street gangs, organized crime, and corruption in Chicago during the 1990s:

The blocked conventional opportunities for youth do not necessarily mean nihilism; rather Chicago activists must understand that black gangs’ direction is up for grabs…. This presents an opportunity for activists and those of us concerned with alienated youth, as Victor Rios argues in his book *Punished*. While it is important to invoke the prosocial path of 1960s black gangs as a positive example for young gang members, today is a very different situation. The old gang leaders’ authority is gone forever, and this vacuum in leadership means there is a choice: either our youth will be left on their own to follow a dark path of nihilism or we can intervene and organize them toward a “contentious politics” of the street. (p. 215)

The analysis presented here suggests that there are at least three keys to politicizing gang members and engaging them in “a ‘contentious politics’ of the street” in ways that are meaningful and sustainable. The first involves building close personal relationships between gang youth and organizers and activists. This process of relationship-building will be very different than what took place during the 1960s, when the commitment of a handful of gang leaders dictated the participation of thousands of gang members in the social movements of that era. The smaller scale of today’s gangs and their emphasis on egalitarianism and autonomy mean that relationships with gang members today will necessarily be built on a smaller scale. In all likelihood, these relationships must be built on the streets of gang members’ own neighborhoods—the places they congregate and the places they care most about. Indeed, ideally, gang members would be recruited into grassroots, neighborhood-based organizations and change efforts, which might then lead to their participation in broader social movements. Indeed, history has shown that people typically become involved—and sustain their involvement—in social movements through the mobilization of existing grassroots organizations and other primary groups in which they are already embedded (Alinsky, 1971; Mattaini, 2013; Morris, 1984). Thus, for example, while the Black Lives Matter movement represents a tremendous opportunity
for gang members to become involved in the fight for social justice, it is unclear how they might participate and maintain their participation in this movement without being grounded in more locally-rooted grassroots organizations. Indeed, while my conversations with current and former gang members suggest that they support Black Lives Matter, none of them nor their comrades have actually become involved in the movement.\footnote{Most of the interviews for this study were completed prior to the ascension of the Black Lives Matter movement into the national spotlight following the August 2014 killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, a predominantly African American suburb of St. Louis. There have been a number of reports indicating that gang members have become involved in Black Lives Matter protests in cities such as Baltimore and Ferguson, however, the extent of their involvement remains unclear (Charles, 2015; Valrey, 2014).} The literature on community organizing and social movements suggests that this disconnect may be driven by their lack of involvement in progressive organizations at the neighborhood level.\footnote{The participation of Chicago’s politicized street gangs in the social movements of the 1960s, moreover, was facilitated by their involvement in neighborhood-based organizations and primarily consisted of neighborhood-based activities. For the Blackstone Rangers, this was accomplished through their involvement with The Woodlawn Organization and First Presbyterian Church, both of which existed in the middle of the gang’s stronghold (Fish, 1973; Fry, 1973). The Conservative Vice Lords, on the other hand, formed their own non-profit organization with the help of a white former Peace Corps organizer (Dawley, 1992; Hagedorn, 2008). It was not until these gangs had become well established in grassroots, neighborhood-based organizing that they participated in broader social change efforts, such as the citywide campaign to integrate Chicago’s construction industries (Gellman, 2010).}

The second key to engaging gang members in prosocial collective action entails helping gang members to develop a new form of critical consciousness in which they reinterpret their situation and the oppressive conditions shaping their communities as changeable, as opposed to inevitable. In other words, this \textit{conscientização} involves the development of a sense of “historical awareness” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 109) of the world, their place within it, and their power to change it. Promoting the development of a critical, historical consciousness among gang members, moreover, is highly consistent with one of central arguments of this study, namely, that street gangs and gang violence are historical phenomena and are subject to variation and transformations across time (see also Brotherton, 2015; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Hagedorn, 2008; Levenson, 2013).
Finally, this process of politicization and mobilization involves helping gang members to reimagine and reconstruct their resistance identities in ways that move them away from internecine violence and other forms of (self-)destruction and toward constructive collective action. As Hagedorn (2008), Levenson (2013), and Brotherton and Barrios (2004) have demonstrated, gang resistance is not static, nor is it inherently destructive (see also Castells, 2010). Yet, perhaps Flores’s (2014) study of Christian *barrio* ministries working with Chicano gang members in Los Angeles offers the most detailed analysis of such prosocial identity reconstruction. More specifically, he found that these ministries promoted a “reformed barrio masculinity” among “recovering” gang members that effectively reoriented them “from the street to the household” (p. 114). Importantly, however, Flores noted that these ministries did not attempt to discard all facts of gang masculinity, or masculine gang embodiment. Reforming all facets of embodied gang masculinity was unlikely.… Recovery allowed men to appropriate facets of gang embodiment in order to facilitate recovery from gang life and progress toward conventional manhood. (pp. 180, 183)

Similarly, the analysis in this chapter argues that many of the elements of gang members’ current, largely (self-)destructive resistance identities can be reinterpreted and refashioned into constructive forms of resistance that transcend street parochialism and can be harnessed for the purpose of constructive collective action. Whether community organizers, activists, and others who care about marginalized young people and reducing violence will reach out to gang members and engage them in this process, however, remains to be seen.
IX. CONCLUSION

Street Gangs as Resistance

The analysis presented over the preceding chapters demonstrates the importance of resistance to fashioning a critical understanding of street gangs (see also Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2008). On one hand, resistance explains why young people join gangs, the functions that gangs play in their lives, and the meanings that they ascribe to their membership in these collectives. For the participants in this study, gangs provided a means of resistance to the economic marginality, physical insecurity, and psychological domination that characterized much of their experience as African American youth from Chicago’s South Side ghetto. More specifically, this resistance took the form of opportunities to generate income in the underground economy, mutual caretaking strategies, support in violent and potentially violent situations, recourse following violent victimization, emotional support rooted in common experiences, and a resistance identity. These young men, in other words, did not join gangs because they were criminal deviants or violent sociopaths; they did so to keep from succumbing to the oppressive realities in which they lived and from internalizing the shame and despair associated with growing up in an impoverished urban ghetto.

Yet, many participants and other black gang members in Chicago found their experiences within the street gangs that they joined to be similarly oppressive. With the advent of Chicago’s crack cocaine epidemic in the late 1980s, the city’s African American street gangs reconfigured themselves as hierarchical, corporate-style, drug-selling street organizations (Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). Gang leaders reaped the lion’s share of the profits derived from these drug enterprises and wielded autocratic power over their respective memberships. Competition over drug markets and power on the city’s streets and in the state’s prisons, moreover, led these
leaders to wage gang wars that made the early 1990s the bloodiest period in Chicago’s history (see also Hagedorn, 2015). Rank-and-file gang soldiers, on the other hand, earned relatively little money selling drugs on the streets and were incarcerated, shot, and killed by the thousands during these top-down gang wars. A series of historical shifts during the late 1990s and early 2000s further exacerbated the marginal position of these young gang members within their street gangs. In turn, these youthful gang soldiers rebelled against exploitive and coercive gang leaders, and their successes to that end eventually shattered Chicago’s black street organizations. In their wake, young gang members forged new gang forms rooted in radically new ideologies of egalitarianism, collectivism, and autonomy. The same impulse of resistance that had brought these young men into their gangs to begin with, in other words, ultimately brought about the fracturing and radical refashioning of these gangs, as well.

The study findings, moreover, reveal the indispensability of gang resistance in developing strategies for reducing gang violence. More specifically, study participants identified a number of social policies, programs, and reforms that they believed would work to transform their communities and combat the city’s persistently high levels of gang violence. They placed no faith, however, in the conventional political process to bring these changes about; indeed, they viewed the oppressive conditions within their communities as a direct reflection of their marginal and denigrated political status as impoverished African Americans. Thus, they contended that it was only through community organizing, activism, and social movement-building that the transformation of their communities and peace on the streets might be achieved. On one hand, the resistance identities embraced by participants and their gang peers have situated them in opposition to the oppressive status quo, thus, facilitating the reclamation of dignity in the face of oppression, denigration, and despair. On the other hand, these identities
have also contributed to internecine violence and other (self-)destructive behaviors that have exacerbated the levels of distress in their already-marginalized communities. Indeed, as other research has demonstrated, resistance identities—even among street gangs—are not static, nor are they inherently constructive or destructive (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Castells, 2010; Hagedorn, 2008; Levenson, 2013). Community organizers, activists, social workers, and other concerned parties, then, have an opportunity to help Chicago’s young gang members reimagine and reconstruct their resistance identities in ways that move them away from gang violence and toward the prosocial collective action they themselves view as necessary to bringing change to their communities and reducing levels of violence. As Brotherton (2015) has argued:

In the current period of late liquid modernity with unremittingly exploitative systems of the political economy, seen particularly in the failing or stagnant rates of social mobility, the gang assumes the function of a social refuge and cultural commune with multiple levels of resistance, modes of expressivity and meaning systems.… What is key, however, is whether this resistance has the potential to become transformative – subverting structures of domination and reinforcing the will and desire to rebel, dissent and imagine a different kind of (sub)world. (pp. 74–75)

Indeed, the delegitimation of gang leadership, the waning influence of traditional gang ideologies, and an increasing awareness among young gang members of the dearth of career opportunities in the drug business make such a transformative resistance a greater possibility today than at any time in nearly half a century.

**Street Gangs as Historical Phenomena**

The findings from this study also illustrate the dynamic nature of street gangs and the violence in which their members are involved. These phenomena are shaped in essential ways by the particularities of the sociohistorical contexts within which they exist at any given time and place, and shifts in these contexts can likewise bring about shifts in the nature of these phenomena. Street gangs and gang violence, thus, must be understood using a critical, empirical,
and historical approach that locates them at the place where their distinctive histories intersect with the conditions of and shifts in the broader sociohistorical landscape within which they are embedded (see also Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2006, 2008, 2015; Hughes, 2006; Kontos, Brotherton, & Barrios, 2003; Levenson, 2013; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000; Vigil, 2002). In applying such an analysis to the study of Chicago’s black street gangs in the early twenty-first century, the current research revealed the radical reconfiguration of these groups and of the violence in which they are involved in relation to their late twentieth century predecessors. It also demonstrated that these transformations were driven by a number of major historical developments, in particular, the declining demand for crack cocaine, the demolition of the city’s public housing projects, and the transfer of gang leaders from state to federal prisons. These historical shifts served to weaken these gangs in a variety of ways and further marginalize their youthful members, thereby creating the conditions for the rebellions that followed.

As discussed briefly at the conclusion of Chapter 6, failure to employ this type of critical, empirical, and historical approach to the study of street gangs often contributes to a static, one-dimensional understanding of these groups in which deviance and pathology are viewed as their defining—indeed, only—traits, arising naturally within the ostensible vacuum that is the gang. Consider, for example, the Chicago Crime Commission’s (2012) depiction of contemporary gang dynamics in Chicago:

Street gangs, both large and small, have splintered into subgroups, or factions, each with its own distinct leader…. Each faction needs a leader, so there are more spots to be won; and since there are fewer members in each faction, juveniles can rise through the curtailed ranks much more quickly…. The current disorganization of gang structure reflects their [gang members’] base desire to seek positions of authority and use their fellow gang members as means towards this end…. Gang members are now ruled by their own greed, rather than any sort of devotion to their brotherhood or leaders. (pp. 14–16)
Such incomplete, demonizing, and—as the analysis presented in the preceding chapters has demonstrated—inaccurate portrayals of street gangs strengthen existing notions of these groups and their members as inherently pathological, different from “normal,” “law-abiding” citizens, and a pervasive threat to this citizenry. Indeed, the Chicago Crime Commission’s (2012) *Gang Book*, cited above, opened with the following, ominous passage: “Most [Chicago] residents… live and work within feet of a gang’s operation…. Yet even the law enforcement organizations that watch them daily cannot precisely gauge the extent of their presence” (p. 13). The not-so-subtle message embedded within this passage is that gangs are insidiously ubiquitous and that Chicago residents are in constant danger of being victimized by the ever-present gang menace, whether they know it or not. Many scholars have contended that these depictions ultimately serve to reinforce a highly inequitable status quo, insulating the ruling class from scrutiny, justifying the punitive control of stigmatized populations, and validating—or, worse still, explaining—the oppressive conditions faced by such groups (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Conquergood, 1996; Hagedorn & Chesney-Lind, 2014; Levenson, 2013). Brotherton (2015), for example, argued that:

The gang is one of the many polymorphous enemies utilized to organize and rationalize this shift in society’s resources and priorities such that extraordinary measures of social control are requested, implemented, and made acceptable as part of the dialectic of population management and the disciplining of the working and sub-working classes…. The constant demonization of the gang, therefore, not only reflects the colonial gaze of the dominant society vis-à-vis the primitives and misbegotten, or a handy “distraction” for the general public away from the business as usual of corporate theft and other skulduggeries…. it is an outgrowth of the ideological war for position that ruling elites have to wage to gain the kinds of consensus and the levels of legitimate authority to rule in a certain way under (un)certain conditions. (pp. 111–112)

Situating street gangs within history and studying these groups in all of their complexities and contradictions challenges such demonizing narratives and the oppressive arrangements that perpetuate gangs and violence within marginalized urban communities. In addition, in the
absence of unlikely, sweeping, and progressive social transformation, such historical, contextual understandings of street gangs are essential to creating effective policies, programs, and other efforts to address these issues. The alternative is a continued reliance on suppressive law enforcement strategies and trendy, one-size-fits-all models of violence reduction, neither of which appear to have made any discernible difference on levels of violence in Chicago.

Study Implications

Implications for future research. As described above and in the preceding chapters, the findings from this study point to a number of implications for future gang research, particularly in calling for an approach to gang research that is both sociohistorical and that attends to matters of resistance (see also Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2008, 2015). These implications, however, also raise the question of who might be involved in carrying out such research. The vast majority of contemporary gang research is conducted by criminologists and, as noted earlier, much of the funding for this research comes from law enforcement agencies. Accordingly, gang researchers from the field of criminology have overwhelmingly eschewed the type of critical approach to the study of gangs espoused here in favor of narrow, positivistic, variable-centric, and pro-law enforcement approaches to gang research (Brotherton, 2015; Hagedorn, 2015; Hughes, 2006). Thus, I would argue that the involvement of scholars from other disciplines, including social work, sociology, community psychology, anthropology, history, the arts, and political science, is imperative to moving gang research beyond the often-pathologizing limitations of conventional criminology by bringing fresh theories, values, emphases, and sensibilities to this work. Indeed, researchers from these and other disciplines outside of criminology have traditionally been among the most widely-recognized and innovative gang scholars (for example, Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Conquergood, 1994,
Implications for community practice. For social workers and others interested in working with gang members in Chicago and beyond, the findings from this study suggest a number of promising directions to this end. First and foremost, in the absence of unlikely sweeping social reforms, efforts to work with gang members and reduce gang violence must be grounded in an empirical, contextual, and sociohistorical assessment of the nature of gang dynamics and violence within a particular time and place. These investigations, moreover, must involve an exploration of the experiences and perspectives of gang members themselves, who should ultimately play an integral role in the design and evaluation of programs, campaigns, and other efforts to address these issues.

With respect to responding to street gangs and reducing violence in Chicago today, in particular, the findings from this study indicate that the first step in any such effort to this end must involve the building of meaningful relationships with gang members. The city’s young gang members value relationships above all else, and that is where any successful work with this population must begin. To be certain, developing such relationships may be a difficult process, as gang members often feel alienated from mainstream social institutions and, as evidenced by the discussion in Chapter 4, even community organizations and other grassroots groups ostensibly designed to empower and serve them and other “at-risk” youth. The alienation of young gang members, therefore, stands not only as an indictment of the trenchant racism and indifference to suffering so characteristic of neoliberal American society, but also of the general abandonment of this population by social workers, community organizers, activists, and other ostensibly concerned parties. Yet, the failures of the past need not determine the course of the
future. Indeed, the centrality of personal relationships for young gang members, the
delegitimation of former gang leaders, the waning influence of traditional gang ideologies, and
the shattering of the illusion of mobility in the illicit drug trade have coalesced to create an
unprecedented opportunity for those who would work with gang youth to build meaningful
working relationships with this population.

Once such relationships have been established, a major focus of work with gang members
in Chicago should involve helping them to reimagine and reconstruct their resistance identities
and engaging them in prosocial collective action aimed at the transformation of their
communities (see the discussion above and in the previous chapter). A wide range of theories
and models of identity reconstruction, organizing, and social transformation might be employed
in such efforts (for example, see Alinsky, 1974; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Durán, 2013;
Ultimately, these campaigns should be designed to address a range of issues affecting the lives of
gang members and other alienated youth in Chicago’s segregated and marginalized
neighborhoods, a number of which are discussed below.

Implications for social policy. Were lawmakers interested in creating and implementing
social policies with the potential to effectively counteract the deep-rooted sense of alienation
among Chicago’s young gang members and reduce the persistently high levels of violence within
the city’s marginalized African American communities, the findings from this study suggest the
importance of addressing a number of policy areas, including: improving neighborhood schools,
overhauling and vastly strengthening mechanisms of police accountability, creating safe
recreational spaces for young people, providing mental health and other human services for
community residents, addressing community blight, and reinvesting in affordable housing.
Perhaps the most salient policy issue bearing on the issue of street gangs and gang violence in Chicago, however, is chronic and pervasive un- and underemployment among young African Americans.

As noted earlier, more than half of African Americans in their early twenties and nearly 90% of working-age black teenagers in the Chicago area are unemployed (Ross & Svajlenka, 2016). Yet, based on my experiences conducting this research and working with black youth in various community settings on Chicago’s South Side, the vast majority of these young people, gang members and otherwise, desperately want to work. Indeed, as the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 6 suggest, most of these youth would readily accept even minimum-wage work—and hundreds did so in the various summer youth employment programs that I administered over the years. Yet, despite their importance, such temporary and relatively limited summer youth employment initiatives fall far short of addressing the employment needs of the city’s youth, particularly its black youth (see the quote from Memphis on page 86). By its own numbers, for example, the city’s summer youth employment program, One Summer Chicago (2016), provided nearly 25,000 youth with jobs last summer—yet 66,000 young people applied for the program. In other words, nearly two-thirds of the youth who applied for the program were turned away, to say nothing of those who did not know about the initiative or were so disillusioned that they did not bother to apply. These dynamics illustrate the spectacular failure of “the market” to provide even the most menial employment opportunities for a staggering number of Chicago’s African American residents as well as the state’s limited interest in addressing this dire situation. Thus, the tremendous importance of employment and the utter direness of the unemployment situation among Chicago’s black youth make this issue a good place for effective social policy aimed at addressing street gangs and reducing violence among black youth to start.
Implications for social work education. The findings from this study suggest two important directions for social work education. The first is that content on street gangs, gang members, and gang and community violence must be integrated across the social work curriculum. This content might include, for example: the reasons that young people join gangs and the roles and meanings that gangs play in their lives; resistance identities; the importance of examining and understanding history as it pertains to street gangs and to the experiences of and conditions within oppressed communities more generally; the alienation of gang members from mainstream social institutions, including, in many cases, social work agencies and community organizations; the traumas that gang members experience, both prior to joining gangs as well as in their roles as gang members; the mental health implications of these experiences of serious violence; the meanings of violence in the lives of gang members and other youth from high-violence communities; the development and implementation of various responses to street gangs and gang violence, situated within their proper sociohistorical contexts; the efficacy of these various policies and programs; and the relevance of practice approaches focused on empowerment and social transformation in working with gang members. This material should be incorporated into foundational and advanced courses throughout bachelor’s and master’s curricula in courses such as human behavior in the social environment, social work with diverse populations, group work, community practice, group practice, social policy, mental health, and practice with children and families. Ideally, specific courses on street gangs and community violence could also be developed and offered as electives.

Study Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Given the nature of gang members as a hard-to-reach study population and the use of non-probability sampling techniques, the
generalizability of the research findings beyond the gangs represented in the study sample is not entirely clear. Indeed, Ralph’s (2010, 2014) recent research with a prominent West Side gang seems to suggest that the processes of gang rebellion and democratization described in this study may be mitigated to some degree by the continued profitability of the heroin trade on the city’s West Side. In addition, the findings from this study likely do not extend to Chicago’s Latino gangs, although my conversations with a gang worker in Little Village, Chicago’s largest Mexican American neighborhood, indicate that renegade identities have emerged within at least one prominent street gang in that community. Nonetheless, the city’s Latino gangs are involved in much less violence than their African American counterparts, and their connections with Mexican drug cartels have provided them with a much firmer footing within the underground economy that has likely served to fortify their leadership hierarchies (Hagedorn, 2015). Nonetheless, the findings from this study are largely reflective of the observations I made during my years of working in South Side communities with members of a number of street gangs beyond those represented in the study sample. These findings, moreover, were discussed with the participatory researchers, who have extensive gang networks and who agreed with the analysis as presented in these chapters. At the very least, then, the findings described in this document clearly indicate a series of striking trends among African American street gangs in several areas on the city’s South Side.

Another study limitation involves the age range of the study sample, which was 16–31. Although this research was designed to explore the dynamics of contemporary street gangs and violence, the need to analyze the shattering of Chicago’s black street organizations and its impact on the city’s gangs today became increasingly clear as the analysis proceeded. Thus, the perspectives and experiences of older and former gang members who were active during the
early years of the 1990s and, ideally, before then, as well, would have certainly added depth to
the analysis. Such a multigenerational exploration, however, was beyond the scope of the study.
In addition, the exclusion of female gang members from the study sample represents another
limitation of this research. Although young men comprise the vast majority of gang members,
the inclusion of female gang members and a more in-depth exploration of gender dynamics
would have undoubtedly added much to the analysis. Ultimately, more critical, gender-
conscious studies of street gangs are needed; however, this type of intensive analysis was beyond
the scope of this study.

As it stands, this study offers a detailed analysis of: the shattering of the black street
organizations on Chicago’s South Side and the refashioning of new gang cliques in their wake;
the prevailing dynamics among these new gangs; the ways in which these dynamics have
reshaped contemporary gang violence in Chicago; and existing efforts and promising directions
for reducing this violence. This analysis is rooted in the experiences and perspectives of 20
active African American gang members who belong to 10 different gangs from a number of
high-violence communities on the city’s South Side.
CITED LITERATURE


VITA

Roberto R. Aspholm

EDUCATION

2016 (Expected)  PhD, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at
Chicago
Dissertation: "This Ain't the '90s": Chicago's Black Street Gangs in the
Twenty-First Century

2009  MSW, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago
Concentration: Child and Family

2008  BSW, Loyola University Chicago
Minor: Criminal Justice
magna cum laude

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Journal Articles
leadership for a new Progressive Movement. The Behavior Analyst.

Book Chapters

Reports
Final report. Chicago, IL: Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research.

AWARDS AND HONORS

2015 – 2016  Dean's Scholar Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
2015  GSC Travel Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
2014  Provost's Award for Graduate Research, University of Illinois at Chicago
2014  Grace Holt Memorial Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
2011 – 2013  Dean's Fellowship, University of Illinois at Chicago
2007 – 2008  Dean's Scholarship, Loyola University Chicago
2006 – 2008  Presidential Scholarship, Loyola University Chicago
2005 – 2008  School of Social Work Dean's List, Loyola University Chicago
2004 – 2008  LUC Grant, Loyola University Chicago
2004 – 2006  Damen Scholarship, Loyola University Chicago
PEER-REVIEWED PRESENTATIONS

2015  Aspholm, R. R. (2015, November). "This ain't the '90s": Chicago street gangs and gang violence in the twenty-first century. Paper to be presented at the American Society of Criminology, Washington, DC.


CAMPUS PRESENTATIONS


TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago
Social Work Research I (Spring 2015; Spring 2012 – Teaching Assistant)
Community Violence (Fall 2013 & 2014)

Adler University
Collaborative Policy Making & Civic Engagement (Summers 2014 – 2016)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2013 – Present  Principal Investigator, "Chicago's Black Street Gangs in the Twenty-First Century." Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago. Funding: Dean's Scholar Award – $35,754; Provost's Award for Graduate Research – $1,168.

2013 – Present  Research Assistant, "Family Options IV Project Evaluation." Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago. Funding: Children's Bureau (AIA) – $300,000.

SERVICE TO PROFESSION

Manuscript Review
Journal of Interpersonal Violence (2013 – Present)

Community Involvement
International Neighborhood Collaborative, Chairman, Board of Directors (2012 – 2016)

UNIVERSITY SERVICE

Graduate Student Council, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department Rep. (2013 – 2014)

RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE

Acclivus, Inc., Program Coordinator (2012)
Metropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization, Director of Youth Programs (2009 – 2011)
Chicago Youth Centers, College and Career Readiness Specialist (2009 – 2010)
Walter H. Dyett High School, Head Coach, Varsity Track and Field Team (2009)
Grand Boulevard Federation, Graduate Student Intern (2008 – 2009)
Youth Organization Umbrella, Youth Development Worker (2006 – 2008)
North Community YMCA, Lead Staff, Beacon's Program (2007)
Hennepin County Adolescent Services, Intern (2006)

TEACHING AREAS

Human Behavior and the Social Environment
Social Work in a Multicultural Society
Generalist Social Work Practice
Social Welfare Policy
Research Methods
Community Violence
Street Gangs
Qualitative Research Methods

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Society of Criminology (2015 – Present)