ARE GANGS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

by

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Abstract

Gangs have been part of our experience since the founding days of this nation, and they seem to be everywhere. Gangs must be a social problem. Or, could one suggest that they are nothing more than a moral panic that has been socially constructed by those in power to increase funding for their agencies and special interest groups. This explanatory study identifies and reviews definitions relative to social problems and gangs, and seeks to determine whether they lead to a conclusion that gangs are a social problem. The study is intended to be representative of the issues surrounding the research problem, and not exhaustive. It is qualitative in nature and critically examines the arguments and theories of others concerning the concepts of social problems and gangs. The study's hypothesis is that gangs can be defined as a social problem. It begins with a review of the literature using a Socratic method: a) What is a social problem? b) How are definitions developed? c) Are definitions always right? d) What is a gang? e) What are gang-related activities? f) What is a criminal gang? g) How are gangs perceived? This is followed by findings and conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement & Hypothesis

Many people who read this study will have already concluded that gangs are a social problem in America today. Most adults can readily respond with a list of identifiable social problems. They can even provide somewhat loose definitions of a social problem or a gang based upon their perceptions acquired from life experiences, the media, and hearsay. Few of us have ever stopped to examine the processes by which we come to form and hold our opinions or beliefs about social problems and gangs. Gangs have been part

of our experience since the founding days of this nation, and they seem to be everywhere. The National Youth Gang Center (NYGC, 1997, p. 9) suggests that youth gangs were reported in all 50 States. According to its official report of a 1995 survey of 3,440 local police and sheriff's departments, the NYGC estimated 23,388 youth gangs and 664,906 gang members (1997, p. xi). This statistic grew to an estimated 28,707 gangs and 780,233 gang members in their 1998 survey report (NYGC, 2000, p. 12). Gangs must be a social problem. Or, could one suggest that they are nothing more than a moral panic that has been socially constructed by those in power to increase funding for their agencies and special interest groups.

This explanatory study identifies and reviews definitions relative to social problems and gangs, and seeks to determine whether they lead to a conclusion that gangs are a social problem. Why such an emphasis on definitions? First, "verbal definitions are needed precisely because the researcher or theorist cannot take everyone to the phenomenon in question" (Ball & Curry, 1997, p. 4). Respective to this study, the researcher would have to examine every small assembly of people and would never get anything completed without parameters which refine the population(s) and the situation(s) to be taken under study. Thus, a description or definition of that which is to be studied is an essential part of the research process. Second, definitions need to be reviewed because numerous perspectives concerning social problems exist, as well as various definitions for the term gang. Three research questions can be formed: (1) How do we determine what is and what is not a social problem? (2) What or who comprises a gang? (3) Do gangs represent a social problem in the United States? A researcher cannot begin to address the research questions until some determination has been reached regarding whether to accept and use one of the proposed definitions, or to consolidate existing definitions to generate a new one. The hypothesis for this paper is that gangs can be defined as a social problem.

Research Design

This study is intended to be representative of the issues surrounding the research problem, and not exhaustive. It is qualitative in nature and critically examines the arguments and theories of others concerning the concepts of social problems and gangs. The study begins with a review of the literature using a Socratic method: a) What is a social problem? b) How are definitions developed? c) Are definitions always right? d) What is a gang? e) What are gang-related activities? f) What is a criminal gang? g) How are gangs perceived? This is followed by findings and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a social problem?

"...a social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in society." (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 53)

Types of social problems. One generally considers issues as either a social problem or as not a social problem. This simplistic approach may be derived from an individual's perception of whether the issue represents "personal troubles" or "public issues of social structure" (Mills, 1961, p. 8). Issues are viewed as either private or public within this context. However, private issues may be considered as public issues when they are perceived by individuals as extensively repeating themselves throughout the domains of the neighborhood, the community, the state, or the nation. Examples of this might be crack houses, unemployment, racism, poverty, drunk driving, certain crimes, or the poor educational performance of American youth as compared with other countries.

Another approach to defining a social problem is identifying it relative to its consistent causation of loss, degradation, pain, harm, or suffering as experienced in a society (i.e., extent of tort). Alvin W. Gouldner (1968, p. 106) suggests the following.

[W]e can recognize that there may be forms of human suffering that are unavoidable, that cannot be remedied in some particular society or at some particular time. Correspondingly, however, there are also forms of suffering that are needless at particular times and places. I think it is the sociologist's job to give special attention to the latter.

Sociologist Jerome G. Manis (1976) expounds the idea of public issues which cause suffering and suggests six types of social problems.

Spurious Social Problems are those perceived social problems that are not contrary to personal or group values or are not detrimental to human well-being (p. 89).

Perceived Social Problems are those social conditions that are identified by groups or individuals as contrary to their group or personal values (p. 84). [They] are not restricted to conditions that are "generally recognized" (p. 84). [They] are not equated with "real ones" (pp. 84-85).

Hypothetical Social Problems are social conditions assumed to be armful on the basis of reasonable interpretations or theories (p. 88).

Unrecognized Social Problems are those conditions deemed harmful by knowledgeable people that are not so identified by other members of society (p. 86).

Demonstrable Social Problems are social conditions identified as

detrimental to human well-being on the basis of reasonable evidence (p. 88).

Adjudicated Social Problems are those conditions in society deemed harmful by knowledgeable people (p. 86).

The nature of social problems.

In his taxonomy, Manis (1976) suggests that the definers of social problems are individuals, groups, knowledgeable people or members of society. He states that a social problem is perceived, assumed, deemed or identified by these definers based upon its harmful, detrimental or contrary nature. However, Herbert Blumer (1971) concludes that the extent of harmfulness is not a primary factor in determining whether or not an issue becomes a social problem. He suggests: "It is a gross mistake to assume that any kind of malignant of harmful social condition or arrangement in a society becomes automatically a social problem for that society" (Blumer, 1971, p. 302). At this point, one may ask, if an issue's harmful nature does not determine whether or not it becomes a social problem, then what does? John P. Hewitt and Peter M. Hall posit that "the nature of the problem is tied intimately to the notion that there is a solution, which in turn implies explanation" (1973, p. 369). They suggest that the availability of an explanation—be that in the present or the future—plays a role in determining whether an issue becomes viewed as a social problem (Hewitt & Hall, 1973, p. 369). Closely linked to the availability of an explanation is the perceived need for social action.

That the efforts of individuals or groups involved in a program or movement (i.e., partisans) aid in resolving social problems has been an essential part of the "sense of mission about the solution" (Gusfield, 1980, p. 10). Arnold M. Rose states that ". . . it is only when society believes that it can do something to reduce or eliminate these evils that the practices can be considered to be social problems" (1971, p. 3). This interpretation is shared by Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg (1995, p. 4): "Sociologists usually consider a social problem to be an alleged situation that is incompatible with the values of a significant number of people who agree that action is needed to alter the situation." A social problem, therefore, may be defined as any public issue for which an explanation exists or can be formed to coordinate overt social action and change.

However, those issues which have been defined as social problems will likely change over the course of time relative to the secularization of society, technological innovations, and the availability of social engineering techniques (Rose, 1971, p. 3). Solutions to older or existing problems may engender new ones. An example may be the document signed by President

Clinton concerning religious freedom and rights.   This has certainly addressed some problems in society.   However, as the television media pointed out in several broadcasts, it has generated a flood of law suits by inmates in correctional facilities across the United States.   The aforementioned example brings to light another important aspect of social problems, that is, opposing parties are a necessary requirement.   "A social problem is always a focal point for the operation of divergent and conflicting interests, intentions, and objectives" (Blumer, 1971, p. 301).   Building upon this idea, one may draw from the work of Armand Mauss (1975, p. xvi) who demonstrates the linkage between opposing interest groups, public perception, and social action.

       [A] social condition . . . is made a problem by the entrepreneurship of various interest groups, which succeed in winning over important segments of public opinion to the support of a social movement aimed at changing that condition.

How are definitions developed?
       "Given social problems, the sociologist's concern is not the problem but how and why such phenomena have come to be a social problem." (Gusfield, 1980, p. 5)

       Developmental process.   The discussion thus far has broadly covered the perception and labeling of public issues as social problems.   It has been suggested that opposing parties or social movements are major role-players in the process of determining what issues become problems. These role-players derive their strength from beliefs that explanations exist, solutions may be envisioned, and that they can bring-about social change.   The developmental process for defining social problems starts with the individual. Perception and identification of an issue as one worthy of concern is governed by the "very different day-to-day realities" which individuals experience (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 60).   These daily experiences not only create differences between groups relative to their issues of concern, they also create differences in that which is imagined as the socially ideal (Ross & Staines, 1972). Perceptions resulting from interaction between daily experiences and images of social ideals are further influenced by differences in group ideologies.   "[G]roup differences in perceptions may be traced to several sources: the power of ideologies to influence and distort perceptions, the comparable power of self-interest, and the impact of the personal experience and vantage point of group members" (Ross & Staines, 1972, p. 20).

Most authors writing about social problems include some explanations for deviance (i.e., theories, paradigms, or perspectives). Robert Ross and Graham L. Staines suggest that groups find "convenient rationalizations" for their interests within their ideologies (1972, p. 20). Steven Spitzer (1975, p. 640) recommends that "the form and content of deviance definitions must be assessed in terms of its [sic] relationship to both structural and ideological changes." Thus, without getting into a debate concerning which social class' or group's interests are served by existing definitions of deviance (i.e., federal and state legal codes), one may draw a line from ideologies to perceptions to personal experiences to rationalizations to definitions—this is relative to both social problems and deviance.

A few authors suggest that social problems are either part of "the process of collective definition" (Blumer, 1971, p. 298) or "products of collective definition" (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 53). Blumer (1971, p. 301) proposes that this process consists of five stages: "(1) the emergence of a social problem, (2) the legitimization of the problem, (3) the mobilization of action with regard to the problem, (4) the formation of an official plan of action, and (5) the transformation of the official plan in its empirical implementations." Blumer's five stages, however, do not address resolution of the problem.

Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk (1988, p. 54) suggest that a social problem progresses "through a sequence of stages (e.g., its incipiency, coalescence, institutionalization, fragmentation, and demine)." Their model has six main elements: (1) "population;" (2) "environments;" (3) "carrying capacities;" (4) "principles of selection;" (5) "patterns of interaction;" and (6) "networks of operatives" (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 56). This model seems to account for every aspect of social problems discussed thus far in response to the first question (What's a social problem?). It takes into consideration individual and group differences, and it covers the developmental process from start to finish (i.e., from perception and definition to social movements and action to social change and problem resolution).

Paradigms and perspectives. Thus far, this discussion has remained broad, providing a review of several authors concerned with the study of social problems. General aspects related to the questions of this section have been presented; that is, types of social problems, the nature of social problems, and the developmental process. Within the preceding discussion, there has been a consistent mention of human actors and their involvement in all stages of the developmental process.

One aspect of this process that has not received specific attention is the explanation. The explanation may function as a keystone within the developmental process. Reviewed authors suggest that public issues, which have been identified as requiring a need for action to induce social change, are only defined as social problems when a probable explanation exists (Hewitt & Hall, 1973; Rose, 1971; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995). Herein, the position of the explanation as a keystone becomes apparent: perception and identification 1 explanation 1 social action and resolution. One must, therefore, determine by whom and how these explanations are conceived and formulated. With little doubt, just about every individual has an explanation. However, leaders of social movements usually derive their explanations from social scientists. Thomas S. Kuhn (1962/1996) uses the term scientific paradigm to refer to the accepted way of conceiving the subject matter of a scientific specialty. The following list of explanations draws from those paradigms and perspectives discussed by social scientists.

Value Conflict (Manis, 1976, p. 11; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, pp. 90-91).

Deviance/Deviant Behavior (Manis, 1976, p. 14; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, pp. 133-134).

Social Pathology (Manis, 1976, pp. 7; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, p. 20).

Social Disorganization (Manis, 1976, p. 18; Ogburn, 1922; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1929; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, pp. 57, 59).

Public Opinion (Manis, 1976, pp. 18-19; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, p. 4).

Labeling (Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, pp. 184-185).

Social Constructionist (Gusfield, 1980, p. 5; Hewitt & Hall, 1973, p. 369; Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, p. 292).

Critical (Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, pp. 238-239).

Knowledge-values (Manis, 1976, pp. 25, 55-65).

This last scientific paradigm or perspective is unique to Manis. He suggests that "[s]ocial problems are those social conditions identified by scientific inquiry and values as detrimental to human well-being" (Manis, 1976, p. 25). His paradigm represents an attempt to facilitate the union of dichotomous positions (i.e., physical and metaphysical, or science and values). In presenting his paradigm, Manis suggests three categories of values and provides these definitions (1976): a) "intrinsic values" (pp. 55-57, 65); b) "contextual values" (pp. 57-60, 65); and c) "social responsibility values" (pp. 60-62, 65). One of the intrinsic values posited by Manis is organized skepticism. In his text, he emphasizes the importance of

"empirical verification" and the "continuing appraisal" of scientific works (1976, p. 56). He suggests that theories, paradigms and perspectives are always open to "criticism, revision, and replacement" (p. 56).

The medicalization of social problems is not addressed separately within this previous listing, but it fits well within a discussion of social constructionism. It "is not the culmination of a movement to find a solution to the problems but only another period in which one imputed reality is substituted for another" (Conrad & Schneider, 1992, p. 6). It is interesting to note that it is no longer acceptable within some circles to refer to someone as a "schizophrenic." Rather, that same individual is to be referred to as a person "diagnosed with schizophrenia" (American Psychological Association, 1994, p. 48). Yet, it is still acceptable to refer to an individual who has killed another as a "convicted murderer" rather than as "someone who has murdered" or as "someone who has been adjudicated for committing homicide."

Are definitions always right?
"From an anonymous attorney, 'Let me make the definitions and I'll win any argument.'" (Maxson & Klein, 1990, p. 71)

Authority and imputations. Relative to social problems, an authority is an individual or group in a position of power to define (e.g., social scientists or the institution which they serve), influence or legislate (e.g., politicians, lobbyists or special interest groups), or invoke action (e.g., social movement advocates and workers, social services employees, or law enforcement officers). The concern of this study is a social issue that arises from definitions of deviance and ultimately from definitions of criminality; that is, gangs. Therefore, this discussion of authority centers on these type definitions. Social scientists are generally considered to be the experts or authorities based on the extent of their experience and research in specific areas, and the extent of professional acceptance of their publications. Joseph R. Gusfield (1980, p. 1) states that sociological perspectives are "systematic maps for understanding." He reifies the authority of social scientists by asserting that sociological perspectives "carry messages about moral and ethical and political attitudes that are wise, proper and effective in responding to public issues" [italics added] (Gusfield, 1980, p. 1). However, the list of paradigms and perspectives demonstrates that many arguments exist concerning the relativism of definitions: "almost any behavior is deviant—to some people . . . [but] no form of behavior is deviant—that is, to absolutely everyone" (Goode, 1975, p. 579). That which is moral and ethical or wise and proper for one person may not be considered as such by another person or

group. Thus, in light of relativism, the authority of social scientists to determine which definitions are to be used in research is either bestowed upon them by those in political power or their peers, or self-assumed.

Although some authors suggest that the attribution of social problems is part of the process of collective definition (Blumer, 1971, pp. 298, 306; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 53), others posit arguments that those in power determine which definitions are used. Erich Goode comments on this from a Marxian perspective (or "critical" perspective as identified above). He suggests (Goode, 1975, p. 578):

 . . . [that] definitions of deviance favorable to those in power manage to win out over definitions that would threaten established ideological and material interests . . . the ruling class tends to dominate a society's intellectual and ideological life, its notion of true and false, of good and bad. Consequently it often happens that the relatively powerless in a given society, the economically deprived, are more likely to have their behavior defined as deviant and are less capable of resisting an imputation of deviance than the affluent and powerful.

One must also consider that it is now generally accepted that social science research cannot be ideologically-free or value-neutral. Commenting on the relationship between ideologies and the construction of perspectives, Goode (1975, p. 575) suggests that those perspectives concerned with one's own behavior "tend to be detailed and subtle; whereas, those dealing with others' behavior "are often shallow and simplified." Herein, a probable conflict arises between supporters of a "collective definition" perspective and supporters of a "domination by the ruling class" perspective. However, it does not seem to make a bit of difference when examining this in light of value-neutrality; since, values will be present whether the researcher uses collective definitions, the definitions of those in power, or her/his own definitions. What seems to matter is not whose definitions are used, rather, whose ideologies are used.

In closing this discussion on authority and the imputation of definitions for deviance and social problems, this author turns to an argument presented by Prudence Rains. Rains (1975, p. 6) posits that authors adhering to the labeling perspective generally address "the process of imputation only to the degree that it can be portrayed as unwarranted." That is to say, that they do not declare all societal imputations are unwarranted, rather, that they center on unwarranted societal reactions in specific cases. She (Rains, 1975, p. 6) suggests that "[t]he effect is to undercut the relevance, even the existence, of actual deviance in the particular case, while nevertheless relying on its general existence to give impact to the argument."

Response and movements. Societal reaction begins with the establishment of, and application of, definitions for deviance or social problems. As Goode (1975, p. 578) puts it, "There is no deviance apart from the response. . . ." On the surface, this sounds much like the age-old question, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, then does it make a noise?" Yet, one may argue that were an individual to kill another in a remote area it would still be murder regardless of whether anyone was present or not to enforce the law. It is relevant at this point to examine what religion says concerning the law and deviance since much of common law is supposedly based on Christian or other religious ideologies. Two passages selected from the Christian Bible: a) ". . . for where no law is, there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15); and b) ". . . but sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Romans 5:13). This seems to correspond with Goode's comment.

"Most interest groups have definitions of reality that are specific to the problems which they promote. . . ." (Mauss, 1975, p. 36). Part of this promotion effort includes the media. Due to the volume of competing issues, supporters turn to persuasive presentations of their problem that have been cast in a light of common sense and plain truth supported by cold, hard facts (Gusfield, 1981). A presentation of technical expertise fosters the position of the authority as one capable of correctly identifying public issues of concern. Facts, which have been officially certified by the authority, are often accompanied by "vivid, emotional rhetoric" (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 62). It is the extent of drama before the eyes of the public that nurtures the perceptions of a social problem. Such drama often incorporates a poster child or other symbols (whether classical or newly created) to "inject urgency into their presentations" (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 62). Gouldner (1968, p. 110) suggests that social reform "is no longer prompted by the twinge of conscience or the bite of immediate personal interest but, rather, by 'reasons of state,' and on behalf of the 'national interest.'" He (Gouldner, 1968, p. 110) states that this "state liberalism" is conducted in a "Bismarckian mood." Within this bureaucratic mind-set, only those putative conditions that have been identified as emerging or expanding problems will receive recognition when budgetary priorities are being set (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

Objectivity and partisans. The issue of partisan objectivity, with particular focus on the partisanship of the sociologist, is twofold. Both parts may be derived from an article written by Howard S. Becker. This begins with the question (and title of his article), "Whose side are we on?" (Becker, 1967). It is followed by the twist on Hamlet that he poses, "To have values or not to have values: the question is always with us" (Becker, 1967, p. 239). One possible answer to this is provided by Gouldner. He suggests that

partisanship is unavoidable, and that bias is inevitable (Goulder, 1968). Gouldner goes on to say, that simply admitting the presence of partisanship or bias does not resolve the issue. Specifically, that "a bland confession of partisanship merely betrays smugness and naiveté. It is smug because it assumes that the values that we have are good enough; it is naïve because it assumes what we know the values we have" (Gouldner, 1968, p. 112). He admonishes sociologists concerning complacency, reminding them "that they, more than others, should have good reason to know what makes liars of them" (Gouldner, 1968, p. 112). Gouldner opines that the sociologist's objectivity may be strengthened by the practice of reflexive, critical examination.

Although Manis seems to craftily address and interweave important aspects of other paradigms, his knowledge-values paradigm represents a teleology that still connects knowledge with values. Yet, Manis (1976) does make his position clear throughout his text; that is, "[b]eliefs that modern science is neutral or guided mainly by disinterested curiosity are incomplete and misleading" (p. 43); "[o]bservation is not a neutral, mechanical process" (p. 45); and that "[v]alue judgments are inherent in the subject-matter" (p. 21). This still leaves us with the question: Can we identify a social problem without attaching values? Manis states that "[u]sing beliefs and values of large numbers of people is not suitable for identifying social problems in a changing, heterogonous society" (1976, p. 82). This returns us to the public opinion paradigm. Thus, we must also consider those public issues in society that have been identified as problems by smaller groups of people. Perhaps, then, we can use several public issues that have been identified by both large and small groups of people to help us establish a realistic list of social problems. This process may assist us in ferreting-out those issues that do not have a loud partisan backing. For example, unemployment is considered by some to be a serious social problem (just ask any laborer who has lost her or his job to "downsizing"). Herein, idleness, loss of status, hunger, low or no income, and other issues associated with poverty are present. To others, the sale and use of narcotics, marijuana, et cetera, collectively represent a greater social problem that is identified as crime. May we, then, posit that any issue which overlaps the perceived social problems of both large and small groups is itself certainly a candidate for the label of a social problem without interjecting the sociologist's values?

It can certainly be argued that any one of these problems results as the watershed (i.e., the dependent variable) of another or other social problems. However, becoming entangled in the quite probably unending and circular search for causality or solutions is not the research problem at hand; rather,

it is identifying whether or not a particular issue is a social problem (i.e., gangs). We may also want to ensure that no determination of extent or magnitude of the problem is made within our attempts to identify social problems (i.e., that one issue is more important or severe than another). Maintaining this practice would engender recognition of others' values and does not impute our own into the assessment. Furthermore, it would not assign precedence or importance to one group's problem(s) over another group's. It would also adhere to Manis' (1976) intrinsic and contextual values (pp. 55-60), and relieve us of having to immediately or simultaneously fulfill his social responsibility values of meliorism and activism (p. 61).

What's a gang
       "I can't define a 'gang,' but I know one if I see one." (Ball & Curry, 1997, p. 4)
        Overview of Definitions. George W. Knox (1994, p. 5) raises the question, "Does calling a group a gang make it a gang?" He suggests that it depends on who is forming the definition. We may conclude from this, that a government attorney's, a politician's, or social scientist's definition will most likely be used instead of one constructed by a community resident. "The difference is power" (Knox, 1994, p. 5). Understanding then that power may be the deciding factor, it is logical to sample some of the definitions in use by government agencies and social scientists.
       1971, Social Scientist (Malcom W. Klien, 1971, p. 13). "[W]e shall use term gang to refer to any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies."
       1975, Social Scientist (Walter Miller, 1975, p. 9) "A gang is a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organization, identifying with or claiming control over territory in the community, and engaging either individually or collectively in violent or other forms of illegal behavior."
       1994, Social Scientist (William B. Sanders, 1994, p. 20)."A youth gang is any transpersonal group of youths that shows a willingness to use deadly violence to claim and defend territory, and attack rival gangs, extort or rob money, or engage in other criminal behavior as an activity associated with its group, and it recognized by itself and its immediate community as a distinct dangerous entity. The basic structure of gangs is one of age and

gender differentiation, and leadership is information and multiple."

1994, Law Enforcement Agency (San Diego County Deputy Sheriffs' Association). "A youth gang by definition is a group of individuals between the ages of 8 and 24 years who associate on a continuous basis. The gang is without formal organization or leadership. A street gang has a name, claims a particular territory or neighborhood, and directs its criminal activity towards rival gangs and the general populations."

1996, Government Agency (Virginia Commission on Youth, 1996). "Survey Definition. Gang—Youth who identify themselves as a group by characteristics may include one or more of the following: structured style of dress, hand signals, claim a geographic territory or turf, identifiable leadership, regular or continuous association, [and] initiation practices."·

1997, Social Scientist (John P. Moore, 1997). "A youth gang was defined as 'a group of youths in (the respondent's) jurisdiction, aged approximately 10 to 22, that (the respondent) or other responsible persons in (the respondent's) agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a gang.'" "Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and adult gangs were excluded from the survey."·

1997, Social Scientist (Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, 1997, p. 24). "[H]ere we define a gang as a group of individuals who transcend the personal and any particular group of collective identities or personalities as they willing use deadly force (which the gang generates and where the violence defines the situation); to commandeer territory, assault rival gangs, steal or exhort money, engage in group orchestrated crime, and names itself and it perceived by its immediate community as a deadly or dangerous presence."

1997, Law Enforcement Agency (Illinois State Police, 1997). "'Street gang' or 'gang' means any combination, alliance, network, conspiracy or understanding, of three of more persons with an established hierarchy; that through its membership engages in a course or pattern of criminal activity (740 ILCS 147/10). Drug Distribution assaults and weapons related offenses are typically associated with established street gangs"

Reviewing these definitions, one finds similarities and differences. The common threads throughout these definitions are youth, recurrent association, territorial claims, criminal activity, and logos (i.e., a group name and/or symbol). Although youth is a commonality, its definition varies across these authors from 8 to 24 years, or remains undefined. One definition (i.e., the one used in a survey and discussed by Moore (1997) is completely ambiguous and leaves out many of the groups that would normally be considered as gangs.

One principle difference is the trend across time elative to gang activities. Many definitions do not include deviance or criminal activity as part of a definition of gangs; these have been omitted from this review. However, within this review, the authors' definitions range from general delinquency to the use of deadly violence and the recurrent performance of criminal acts. Another difference centers on gang leadership and the organizational structure of gangs. Sanders (1994, p. 15) suggests that the "best way to describe gang leadership appears to be in terms of the following: multiple—more than a single leader at any one time; informal—choice of leader is not structured; situational—leadership role may only be in certain situations; and functional—situated leadership is based on a particular function." Some authors posit that gangs have little or no leadership hierarchy—a most dangerous assumption. However, Knox (1994, p. 24) suggests a more logical or scientific approach, "It is safer to assume that natural variation exists in the level of organizational sophistication of gangs."

Knox's definition if far more specific in its itemization and more accurately reflects the evolving nature of gangs in America today. His definition reflects a structural analysis, and does not wander-off suggesting "shades" of various items as essential to a definition (e.g., initiation rites). The following items comprise Knox's (1994) definition of gangs.

Age-graded Participation: "The modern gang has adult leaders, who usually have extensive criminal histories as well. Most serious gangs have 'pee wee' members" (p. 34). "[T]he term 'youth gang' . . . inaccurately describes the social reality of American gangs" (p. 9).

Gender-graded Participation: "[S]pecific gangs more often than not consist of members who are predominantly of one racial or ethnic group" (p. 75).

Ethnic Homogeneity: "[A]rise and have a local network with a specific geographical pattern of activity" (p. 25).

Recurrent Criminal Activity: "To consider a group of a gang, one of the required defining characteristics must be this factor of recurrent criminal activity" (p. 33). "Some element of criminal conspiracy to avoid detection for law violation must therefore be present . . . to avoid or limit the probability of arrest. . . ." (p. 8). "A group is a gang when it exists for or benefits substantially from the continuing criminal activity of its members. Some element of crime must exist as a definitive feature of the organization for it to be classified as a gang. That need not be income-producing crime, because it would also be crimes of violence" (p. 7).

Variation in Sophistication: "[V]ariation in leadership style along with differences in the level of organizational development among gangs" (p.

24). "[A] hierarchy of authority, a chain of command, and the division of labor" (p. 25). —Level Zero: "is at worst a 'pre-gang' " (p. 22). —Level One: "is an emergent gang, typically consisting of only one unit of operation" (p. 23). —Level Two: "is a crystallized gang and has a definite structure" (p. 23). —Level Three: "is a highly structured gang . . . may include numerous 'chapters,' 'sets,' or franchises. . . ." (p. 23); "often with written constitutions" (p. 329). — Level Four: "syndicated, organized crime cartels or families" (p. 329). No matter how large and organized a gang becomes, it must demonstrate an ability to, and actuality of, political corruption and establishment of legitimate business (p. 329).

What are gang-related activities?

"We do not reprove it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we reprove it." (Emile Durkheim, 1933:81)

One could readily construct a "laundry list" of activities related to gangs by drawing from personal observation, a host of social science authors, newspaper articles or television presentations. This list would probably include everything from the beer drinking of minors while playing games of dominoes, to littering and graffiti, to the sale of controlled substances, and to murder. One may safely suggest that gang-related activities generally fall under the title of "crime," representing offenses from both civil and criminal codes. Upon first consideration of this question ("What are gang-related activities?"), one may opine that an answer could easily be concluded. However, such is not the case. In their article, Claire Johnson, Barbara Webster and Edward Connors (1995) discuss the disparity they found concerning definitions of gang-related crime. They state that neither a single source nor a common definition exists for use among America's court, law enforcement, or correctional systems. They find that definitions "varied widely from State to State and were established either by State statutes or operationally by police departments, prosecutors, and administrators of gang prevention and intervention programs" (Johnson, Webster & Connors, 1995).

The underlying component in the problem of defining gang-related activities is that of determining when to count a crime as related to, or unrelated to, a gang. Many suggest that the gang or its leader must have prior knowledge of, and give approval for, the commission of a criminal act. In other words, "[a] gang incident is an incident in which there was gang motivation, not mere participation by a gang member" (Spergel, 1991, p. 23). Johnson, Webster and Connors (1995, pp. 4-5) report that 44 percent of large jurisdictions and only 27 percent of smaller jurisdictions classify any crime

committed by a gang member as gang-related regardless of any benefit to the gang. In their article, they state that 44 percent of large jurisdiction and 59 percent of smaller jurisdictions "defined a gang crime as only a crime committed by a gang member for the benefit of the gang." Thus, one is faced with having to decide whether a crime must be committed under the auspices of a gang or its leader, and to their mutual benefit

Returning to the definition offered by Knox (1994), he suggests that the entire milieu in which a gang arises and persists must be taken into account. Within this context, he states that one may find poverty, racism, oppression, low integration with "mainstream" society and the work force, and a justice system which propagates adult criminals from its youth. Since gang membership is often a lifetime commitment, any member moving about the community—whether in the conduct of lawful or criminal acts—is a representative of her or his gang. Therefore, a gang member's independent actions that do not directly benefit the gang will indirectly benefit the gang in some manner. As Knox puts it (1994, p. 7), "Crime involvement of a group must not therefore be a sub rosa function about which few of the members have knowledge if we are to consider the group a gang." "To be considered a gang, the criminal involvement of members must be openly known and approved of as such" (Knox, 1994, p. 8). This may be interpreted simply as knowledge and approval in general of the propensity of a gang's members for criminal behavior (i.e., before, during and after the fact); and not to mean that specific prior knowledge and approval by a gang or its leader is mandatory.

What's a criminal gang?

"To be more specific, here the definition of gangs will be restricted to not simply involvement with or committing acts of deviance, but rather to crime." (George W. Knox, 1994, p. 7)

The term "criminal gang" appears occasionally in the literature. Its use seems to be that of clarification; that is, to help differentiate between noncriminal and criminal groups. However, one may respond to the question ("What's a criminal gang?") with a question (What is the difference between a gang and a criminal gang?). If we are to use the definitions provided by the majority of social scientists and government agencies, then a gang could be any group demonstrating violence on one occasion. This seems to be more fitting for a scenario of violence acted-out during a mob riot, a political protest, or a labor strike. However, using the more refined or restrictive definition established by Knox (1994), then this query ("What is the difference between a gang and a criminal gang?") is rhetorical since the use of "criminal" as an adjective with the noun "gang" may be considered

redundant.

How are gangs perceived?

The focus here is upon human perception, and not upon an analysis of the magnitude of crimes committed by gangs of their members as a result of some tallying-up. Ross and Staines (1972, p. 19) offer the following.

Since meeting the major needs of people represents a very demanding ideal, we propose, more people have come to see social reality as falling short of this ideal and have, therefore, perceived more social problems. . . . People are, therefore, more willing to acknowledge the existence of social problems.

But, how do people come to acknowledge gangs as an emergent social problem? Probable sources are the media and personal observation. Gangs have always existed in societies throughout history. However, a growth in private and public concern is logical since it may reflect the increased coverage by the media during the early 1990s that portrayed a proliferation in gang membership and an increase in the level of gang violence. William Recktenwald (1997) provides a couple statements which reflect the classical presentation of gangs in the media: a) "The sale and use of crack cocaine . . . has spread across the entire state . . . ." (p. 1); and b) "Illinois is experiencing an alarming increase in gang-related violence . . . with gang homicides jumping fourfold to 215 from 1987 to 1995 Chicago" (p. 2). Suman K. Sirpal discusses perceptions of gangs held by the public and law enforcement officers, and the portrayal of gangs in the media. He (Sirpal, 1997, p. 13) states that "gang members are mean and cruel, have no respect for their own or others' lives, and commit senseless crimes for personal profit . . . who have no aim in life but the destruction of the society for personal gain."

As discussed earlier, a researcher's presentation of gangs may reflect either the public's perceptions, a government's goals, or the actuality of the issue. David E. Neely (1997) only addresses the issue of African-American street gangs in his article. Yet, perhaps, one may extend his comment to all gang activity across the United States. He suggests that gang-associated problems "have now become an inescapable concern for mainstream America" (Neely, 1997, p. 37). It is the position of some researchers (e.g., Knox, 1997) that the government has long ignored the issue of gangs and under-estimated, and under-accounted for, the real extent of the gang problem.   In their review of one study's findings (an NIJ-sponsored nationwide survey; n = 192 completed questionnaires), Johnson, Webster and Connors (1995) state that "more than 80 percent of prosecutors acknowledged gangs were a problem in their jurisdiction." A quick review

of other authors' works demonstrates a relationship between gangs and social problems: a) "gangs are a community problem" (Virginia Commission on Youth, 1996); b) "The gang problem is not a 'their problem;' the gang phenomena is an 'our problem'" (Kirk-Duggan, 1997, p. 24); and c) "Communities are implementing a combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies to address the gang problem" (Burch & Chemers, 1997, p. 1).

The federal government has clearly joined private citizens and researchers in the perception of gangs as a social problem. Recktenwald (1997, p. 1) cites a report prepared by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority that states, "While urban areas were hit particularly hard, suburban and rural communities were far from immune from the problem.'" This assessment is supported by Moore (1997) in his article, wherein, he comments on the increase in the number of cities, towns, and counties with gang problems. Agencies supported by the federal government have been established to specifically address the gang problem. The National Youth Gang Center "was created because of the proliferation of gang problems over the last two decades, from larger cities to smaller cities, suburbs, and even rural areas" (Bilchik, 1995). Although commendable, the establishment of an agency that looks at only "youth gangs" ignores the concept of age-graded participation within gangs where adult leadership may be found.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings

The first portion of the literature review centered on defining a social problem: a) What's a social problem? b) How are definitions developed? c) Are definitions always right? The review of literature demonstrated that this is an issue of greater complexity than appears on the surface. First, the types of social problems posited by Manis (1976) hint that this issue goes beyond simply determining whether a public matter of concern is, or is not, a social problem. He suggests six types ranging from those that are perceived but not in conflict with values (spurious social problems), to those that have been fully acknowledge and labeled (adjudicated social problems). Second, the nature of social problems is not as closely linked to the extent of perceived harmfulness to human well-being as one may surmise. The review showed that the existence of an explanation suggestive of a solution, coupled with the perceived need for social action and change, functions as a keystone in the developmental process of a social problem. Numerous paradigms or

perspectives (i.e., "explanations") exist. One may surmise that "[e]ach perspective has been more powerful in dealing with some types of problems than others, and each seems more likely to be employed in some cases than in others" (Rubington & Weinberg, 1995, p. 358).

Another ingredient of the nature of social problem definition is the requisite presence of opposing groups to promote their issue or cause as a social problem. The most popular or consistently argued perspectives center on collective definitions; however, in order for a group's collective definition to become recognized as the principle definition it must engage in a promotional campaign against opponents. This promotion often involves drama (to stimulate the urgency of required action) and the presentation of technical expertise (to strengthen perceptions of the authority among the public). Finally, the complexity of defining social problems is enhanced by the issues of partisanship and values. On the surface, one may assess as problematic the choice of a researcher must make relative to the paradigm or perspective to be employed as the "explanation." However, the choice likely hinges on the researcher's values, the ideologies of superiors, or the objectives of financial supports—all of which will affect the researcher's objectivity. Within this context, Becker's (1967) question still remains relevant for us today: "Whose side are we on?"

In summary then, a social problem is a private issue that has risen to the level of a public issue based upon perceptions (public opinion/collective definition) of its harmfulness to society. An issue is identified and defined as a social problem when an explanation exists and suggests likely resolution of the issue. Opposing groups are a must; some may consider an issue a social problem while others may not. Within this context, drama and displays of technical expertise are essential in winning-over the support of the public, financial backers, and those in politico-economic power. One may ascertain that gangs are perceived by the general public, and by local and federal agencies as a problem worthy of special attention. Johnson, Webster and Connors (1995) suggest that "[s]treet gangs are a social and political concern because of the crimes that their members commit." A strong correlation between gang membership and criminality is supported by empirical research. "The hypothesis that gang membership and delinquent behavior are related has stood the test of time and seems to be an accepted empirical fact by the research community. . . .[it] is increasingly being identified as a major factor in the rising level of violence in the United States . . . ." (Sirpal, 1997, p. 13).

Conclusions

Clearly, gangs fit the definition of a social problem provided in the literature review. As pointed out by Johnson, Webster and Connors (1995, pp. 3-4), 84 percent of large jurisdictions and 46 percent of smaller jurisdictions reported gang problems. Although the findings of the 2004 National Youth Gang Survey (NYGC, 2006, p. 1) of law enforcement agencies (n=2,296) show a decline in reporting statistics, 82 percent of agencies serving larger cities, 42 percent serving suburban counties, 27 percent serving smaller cities, and 14 percent serving rural counties reported youth gang problems. Gangs do seem to be everywhere, and they are involved in violence. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, "victims in about 9% of all violent crimes believed the offender to have been a gang member" between 1998 and 2003 (Harrell, 2005, p. 1), and 6.5 percent of all homicides in 2003 were gang-related (Harrell, 2005, p. 2). Gangs are perceived by the public, government and researchers to be present and as harmful to society based primarily upon concerns about their criminal activities and associated violence.

Many explanations for criminal behavior and gangs exist. Additionally, these explanations suggest that something can be done to address and correct the issue of gang crime and violence. There are opposing groups: lawful citizens versus gang members (potential and actual victims versus offenders), those who provide low estimates of the gang problem versus those who provide higher estimates (i.e., researchers and various private or government agencies versus one another). Thus, the hypothesis that gangs may be defined as a social problem in the United States today may be accepted.

Gangs and their members who commit crimes should rightfully be addressed as a criminal justice issue and as a social problem. However, to more properly and thoroughly address the issue, the United States needs to confront the underlying issues that engender gang formation. "[I]nteractions among problems are central to the process of collective definition . . . social problems exist in relation to other social problems. . . . " (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 55). We must, therefore, discover a way to practice our form of capitalism without sacrificing our youth and our future to disparaging marketing and materialism.

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