

Transnationalism: Law enforcement perception's of gang activity on the Texas/Mexico border

by

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Abstract

Traditional gang activity has ranged from defending neighborhood turf, graffiti, and the occasional street fight. However, in the last several years law enforcement has perceived gangs as complex criminal organizations with transnational ties. This study explores the activities of perceived transnational gangs in the United States along the Texas/Mexico border. Data was collected in survey form from local and county enforcement agencies. Results are exploratory in nature. Findings produced in this study have indicates that transnational gangs are active and there is a genuine perceived concerned by law enforcement agencies.

Introduction

Transnationalism is a concept that transcends disciplines. The concept encompasses issues such as commerce, culture, and crime. In many cases, these notions tend to overlap; this is especially evident when addressing the proliferation of transnational gangs. Gangs have been perceived as a social menace that transcends the confines of nations, and therefore the concerns are not addressed in unilateral solutions. Gang problems may be magnified where international boundaries connect countries with vastly different social, political, and economic structures. Such is the case of the US/Mexico border. In this case, the Texas/Mexico border and its perceived transnational gang threat have a far-reaching social impact on law enforcement on the community.

According to Vigil (1998) the public, law enforcement, and policy makers have a perceived notion that gangs have plagued our society and are viewed as a domestic threat, wreaking crime and violence on innocent by-standers. The perceptions of gang culture on the Texas/Mexico border are no different than the rest of the United States. Gangs are viewed by law enforcement as extremely violent, in which persons no longer feel they need to understand the phenomenon but simply want to "stop it" (Vigil, 1988). While stopping the phenomenon is desirable, Vigil (1988) notes that this lack of analysis can only impede one's desire (Vigil, 1988). It is imperative to have an understanding of the transnational gang phenomenon before

one can begin to generate positive social change.

The purpose of this paper is to describe law enforcement's perceptions on transnational gangs in the United States along the Texas/Mexico Border. Several studies have allowed for the observance of gangs from the perspective of the gang member (Huff, 2002; Miller, 2000; del Carmen, Rodriguez, Dobbs, Smith, Butler, & Sarver, 2008; Vigil, 1988). Many of the studies by academicians have noted consistently that gangs are not as sophisticated and organized as perceived (Huff, 2002; Miller, 2000; del Carmen, et al., 2008; Vigil, 1988). These studies have indicated that gangs are the result of poverty, economic marginality, and lack of informal social control mechanism such as school, community, and family (Decker, Katz, & Webb, 2008; Huff, 2002; Miller, 2009; del Carmen, et al., 2008; Valdez, 2004; Valdez, 2009; Vigil, 1988). By observing perceptions of law enforcement officials, the authors begin to understand a different perspective of the gang phenomenon. Law enforcement, by virtue of their job and encounters with gang members have different views to the perceived threats of gangs.

The border region of Texas and Mexico was chosen as the area to study transitional gangs due to the interplay of the supply and demand of drugs. The supply and demand dynamics between Mexico and the United States is not a new development, but Mexico has become the primary supplier of illicit narcotics since the demise of Columbia Cali and Medellin Cartels in the early 1990's (Broude, 2009; Cook, 2008). As Americans continue to consume narcotics in exponential numbers, Mexicans drug cartels provide the supply. It is reported that 90% of all cocaine and 70% of all methamphetamines and heroine consumed in the United States transports through Mexico (Broude, 2009; Cook, 2008). The difference in the past few years is the historic rise in violence over the distribution routes through Mexico toward the United States. Recently, drug related murders have doubled from 2,713 in 2007 to 6,200 in 2008, and the first 3 months of 2009 witnessed 1,500 murders (Gonzalez, 2009; GAO, 2009). These deaths have been attributed to drug cartels, which may have ties to gangs in the United States. These multi-national ties have led to the notion of transnational gangs, which quintessentially can be described as a by-product of several factors. The four primary factors contributing to the perceived increase in transnational gangs and drug violence are: 1) The United States demand for narcotics drives the Mexican drug industry (Broude, 2009; Cook, 2009). 2) The implementation of NAFTA increasing the amount of border activity and ease to transport illicit narcotics and goods. 3) The Mexican government's continuing transition for a one party rule to a democratic government (Cook, 2008; GAO, 2009). 4) And the increasingly amount of arms being smuggled into Mexico from the United States (GAO, 2009). The culmination of these factors has changed the geopolitical dynamics of the relationship between Texas and Mexico as it relates to gangs, drugs, and violence (Broude, 2009; Campbell, 2008; Cook, 2008; Futginiti, 2008; Gonzalez, 2009; GAO, 2009; Marroquin, 2010; O'Neil, 2009). The aforementioned factors are beyond the scope of this paper but should be considered in understanding the perceived dynamics of transnational gangs on the border. A

question to consider before moving forward is what extent have these four factors this impacted the perception of transnational gangs living and operating in the United States?

Literature Review

Johnson and Muhlhausen (2005) noted that gangs once provided outlets for marginalized youths to socialize, control territory, and release aggression. More recently, perceptions of gangs have morphed and now are viewed as informal affiliates of international criminal networks with esoteric operations. According to Vittori (2007), US-style gangs are becoming more common worldwide because of globalization. Their transnational nature is facilitated by fluid migration across national borders, incarceration with experience criminals in U.S. prisons, and a lack of anti-gang legislation in Mexico (Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005).

As immigrants settle in new destinations along the nation's border, they inevitably shape the life of local communities. The incorporation of immigrants in the United States reflects this country's political involvements abroad and its political economy at home, set within an evolving global system and varying levels of transnational life (Smith, 2008). Salvadorian migration was a prime example that has been a direct result of United States foreign policy. Salvadorian migration grew exponentially during the two to three years the United States became directly involved with the training of right-wing regimes in Central America in the 1980s (Rodriguez & Cintron, 2008). Due to the war torn country, the only option for the people of El Salvador was to migrate to the United States for a better life. The Salvadorian migration has been characterized as one of struggle, discrimination, and violence. These immigrants were seen by some as contributors to the breakdown of the United States' morality, unity, and stability. This perceived danger involves the invocation of the theme of "immigrant criminality" (Lamn & Imhoff, 1985). The myopic view implied that immigrants are inherently criminal by generalizing the observation that illegal immigrants are by definition "criminal." As a result, the immigrant status, in this case, El Salvadorian immigrants, may create a social barrier that can be difficult to overcome; ultimately, resulting in the formation of deviant groups.

While these transnational gangs are perceived as fluid in their cross border activities they also affect the life of local communities. Oftentimes the change is observed in the level of fear in relation to crime. For example, according to del Carmen, et. al, (2008), "Danger and fear, backed by personal experiences, are a normal part of a gang member's life from a very early age." This danger and fear, or what some may argue, "perceived fear," carries a strong connotation of moral panic. This moral panic may affect the policies and procedure of local law enforcement.

Local law enforcement may have limited resources for prevention and intervention. Due to the perceived danger of gangs the result has been that some law enforcement agencies have adopted aggressive policies such as suppression (Spiegel, Curry, Chance, Kane, Ross, Alexander, Simmons, & Oh, 1994). These

suppression tactics include but are not limited to surveillance, stakeouts, arrests, patrol, investigations, and intelligence gathering. Some police agencies have also created complex data and information systems that have improved streamline communication within and outside their agency. However, according to Spergel et al., (1994), relying on suppression alone has proved long-term ineffectiveness. By solely incarcerating gang members, one may simply be facilitating the gang problems. Although prison gangs and street gangs are interdependent, the prison has been regarded as a training school for street gangs; essentially the justice system is locking up young street gang members and putting them with more experienced and hard core members in prison. In most prisons, prison gangs are outgrowths of street gangs, but evidence has indicated that gangs formed in prison may emigrate to the streets (Spergel et al., 1994). The proximity to the Texas/Mexico border may play an integral role on the activities of transnational gang members once released from their incarcerative institutions; their movement to and from Mexico compounds to the problem at an international, regional, and local level.

Due to the perceived sophisticated forms of violence and increasing threat of security, Mexico has been battling a war against transnational gangs. However, the lack of anti-gang legislation in Mexico has precipitated to the gang problem on the Texas/Mexico border. According to USAID (2006), until recently, Mexico has a largely unacknowledged problem with international and local gangs. Furthermore, as of 2006 Mexico has not implemented any type of anti-gang legislation. USAID (2006) has also indicated that there are structural weaknesses in the Mexican Judicial, law enforcement, and penitentiary systems that contribute to the gang problem. Due to the structural weaknesses of these entities, transnational gang activity is fueled by the relative ease in which gang members can cross borders, which creates a self-perpetuating “revolving door” phenomenon (USAID, 2006). The revolving door refers to the ongoing and circular flow of gang members from the north to the south and vice versa. Before we continue to place blame on other countries, we must also look to our own back yard.

Texas, specifically the border has a plethora of issues that may contribute to the transnational gang problem. Conditions of the border compound to the notion of fear of crime. According to Padilla and Daigle (1996), conditions on the border, such as poverty, economic disparity, increasing population and industrial growth, and the exacerbation of poor living conditions due to inadequate infrastructure compound to the issues of social welfare.

First, The border region is characterized by disproportionately high rates of poverty. Overall, 30 percent of all families on the US side of the border fall below the poverty level in 1990 (Barry, Browne, & Sims, 1994; Fonteno, Singlemann, Slack, Siordi, Poston, & Saenz, 2010; Padilla & Daigle, 1996). Secondly, added to this general level of poverty is the dynamic of unequal pattern of economic development. For example, per capita income is three times higher in the Texas border region, than the Mexican border region. Nevertheless, Texas border cities are compared to other US cities, data on per capita income reveal that in 1990 four of the five poorest cities

in the US with populations over 100,000 are along the US/Mexico border (Barry, Browne, & Sims, 1994; Fonteno, Singlemann, Slack, Siordi, Poston, & Saenz, 2010; Padilla & Daigle, 1996). Third, even today, border cities are experiencing rapid rates of population and industrial growth, which has not been married with the expansion in public services and social infrastructure. The impact of rapid growth has been congestion, uncontrolled urban development, and lack of adequate housing and basic public health and sanitation facilities on both sides of the border (Barry, Browne, & Sims, 1994; Fonteno, Singlemann, Slack, Siordi, Poston, & Saenz, 2010; Padilla & Daigle, 1996). The culmination of these issues may contribute to the notion of social disorganization and the end result may be a perceived threat of a transit population, urban dwellers, deviant groups, drugs, and gangs.

Methodology

Since the purpose of this research was to collect data on perceptions of law enforcement on gang activity on the Texas/Mexico border, the most qualified individuals were selected to participate in this study. This purposive sampling method selects individuals based on their knowledge of certain expertise. Broadly conceived, these individuals included law enforcement agencies in the United States along the Texas/Mexico border region. While a more inclusive sample could have been deployed, it was decided that professionals of these types of organizations is a good starting point. Further, these organizations may have contact with gang members on a day-to-day basis. In essence, a process of self selection has occurred by their mere profession.

The current study is exploratory and is descriptive in nature. Since there is a dearth of research on transnational gangs along the Texas/Mexico border, the researchers were gathering preliminary data to describe the region and activities of transnational gangs as perceived by law enforcement agencies. The future goal is to conduct a follow-up study where sophisticated analyses may be employed to determine bivariate and multivariate correlations.

There are an estimated 12,000 law enforcement agencies in Texas. Since the study's focus is the border region of Texas and Mexico, there were an estimated 120 Texas law enforcement agencies that were included in the sample population as potential participants along the Texas/Mexico Border. These agencies included local municipalities, county agencies, and constables. Initially, law enforcement agencies on Mexico's side of the border were also considered but due to funding and time constraints this was not possible. However, with external funding agencies across the border can be examined. Data from Mexico's side of the border would have included law enforcement from several states along the border, see table 1.

Table 1: Exclusion & Inclusion of Law Enforcement Agencies by Geography
Area/Region

	<i>Not Included</i>			
Mexican States	Chihuahua	Coahuila	Nuevo Leon	Tamaulipas
	<i>Included</i>			
Texas*	El Paso	Marfa	Del Rio	Laredo Rio Grande Valley

*Researcher's divided Texas by five general sectors. The method is used by the US Border Patrol

table 2 page here

Researchers divided Texas by five general sectors; this method is employed by the United States Border Patrol. The Texas sectors only included the counties that are annexed to the Mexican border or whose proximity warrants investigation of perceived transnational gangs in the region (e.g. Jim Hogg County). The El Paso sector included law enforcement within the counties of El Paso, Hudspeth, Culberson, Jeff Davis, and Presidio. The Marfa sector includes the counties of Brewster, Pecos, Crockett, and Terrell. Del Rio sector includes Val Verde, Kinney, Maverick, and Dimmitt Counties. The Laredo Sector includes Webb, Zapata, and Jim Hogg counties. The Rio Grande Valley sector only included law enforcement agencies located within the counties of Willacy, Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr. Twenty counties were included as possible participants, in addition to the local law enforcement within these counties.

Data was collected by mail-out questionnaires. Questionnaires were sent out during the fall of 2009. A cover letter accompanied the survey to identify the purpose of the study and to assure confidentiality, along with information pertaining to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for purposes of withdrawing for the study. In addition, the cover letter included information about the project being funded by a collaborated seed grant given by the college of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Arlington. Due to the initial low response rate a follow-up questionnaire was sent to those who fail to respond in early spring 2010.

Sample

The initial sample size included a possible 120 participants, which encompassed law enforcement agencies from county agencies, local municipalities, and constables. The sample was purposive sampling due to the nature of the study, and proximity of the agencies to the Texas/Mexico border. A first wave of surveys was sent out in the fall of 2009 with a response rate of 16%, 19 surveys were returned. A follow-up was administered in the spring of 2010, which increased the response rate to 39.1%, for a total of 47 surveys returned. Some agencies sampled had specialized gang units, in these cases an individual associated with the gang unit completed the survey. In all other cases, the person most knowledge about gangs in the jurisdiction completed and returned the survey.

Results/Analysis

The surveys returned indicated that 59.9% (28) of the law enforcement agencies did have active transnational gangs in their jurisdiction. The remaining responding law enforcement agencies 40.4% (19) indicated “no” transnational gang activity in their jurisdiction, see table 3.

Table 3: Jurisdictions reporting active transnational gangs

	Yes	No	Total
Percent	59.9%	40.4%	100%
Number	28	19	47

There were 26 transnational gangs identified along the Texas/Mexico border by law enforcement agencies. The agencies indicated that the average age of the gang members was 28.5 years old with a range between 14 up to 41 years of age. Of the twenty six gangs identified, twenty four of them predominantly composed of male members, while two of the transnational gangs were composed of predominantly female gang members. This was an interesting find since, the majority of gang research has indicated that female gangs are far and few in-between. Although female gangs do exist it is difficult to conceive transnational female gangs. As expected along the Texas/Mexico border, the gangs compose of mostly Hispanic gang members, while two gangs were identified as being predominantly white members, see table 4.

Table 4: Characteristics of transnational gangs

Number of Gangs	Identified	26
Age	Average	28.5
	Range	14-41
Gender	Male	24
	Female	2
Ethnicity	Hispanic	24
	White	2

Questions on migration were asked and whether these gangs migrate across the border. Law enforcement indicated that at least 22 gangs found in this region do migrate to and from the Texas/Mexico border. When asked about reasons for migration engaging in drug markets was the number one response by law enforcement. Migration for social reason came in second along with other unidentified reason, crackdowns of gangs came last, see table 5.

Table 5: Migration Patterns/Reasons

	Migrating/Reasons	# of Gangs
Number of Gangs	Migrating	22
Reasons	Social	5
	Drug Markets	10
	Crack Downs	2
	Other	2

Law enforcement was also probed on question about the gang's activities concerning drug distribution. Law enforcement was asked if the identified gangs engaged in any or multiple type of drug distribution in their jurisdiction. The drugs identified by law enforcement were powder cocaine, crack cocaine, marijuana, heroin, meth, and ecstasy. Powder cocaine and marijuana both came in on top for the

drug of choice to distribute by transnational gangs. These are followed by heroin and meth. Crack cocaine and ecstasy is distributed by at least 13 transnational gangs, see table 6.

Table 6: Drugs

Drug Distribution	# of Gangs Participating
Powder Cocaine	21
Crack Cocaine	13
Marijuana	21
Heroin	15
Meth	15
Ecstasy	15

The researchers also considered questions about other types of criminal activities in which transnational gangs may participate other than drug distribution. Law enforcement indicated assault was the other major criminal activity conducted by transnational gangs, followed by burglary, robbery, and motor vehicle theft. Lastly, it was indicated by law enforcement that larceny was committed by the gangs but was not as prevalent as the previously mentioned activities, see table 7.

Table 7: Other Crimes

Criminal Activity	# of Gangs Participating
Assault	18
Robbery	16
Burglary	17
Breaking & Entry	12
Motor Vehicle Theft	16
Larceny	12

Law enforcement was also asked about the perceived general concerns of transnational gangs in their region. Responses ranged from 1 (not concerned) to 5 (very concerned). The first question posed was “how widespread are general police concerns?” The mean response was high, however, in comparison to other responses it ranked at the lowest along with a growing concern of prostitution, and declining safety of schools ($\mu=3.96$). Law enforcement perceived the increase of illicit drugs in their jurisdiction as there number one concern with a mean of 4.38, followed by increased victimization ($\mu=4.35$). Next was a concerned for increased violence and an increase concern of transnational gangs linked with crimes in Mexico ($\mu=4.27$). Another perceived concern was the methods to identify transnational ($\mu=4.19$). Identifying gang members has become a concern across the country due to the notion of racial profiling. Other areas identified were declining safety in the city ($\mu=4.15$),

and declining safety in neighborhoods ($\mu=4.12$) as it pertains to concern. An interesting result was the rank of concern for increase border crossing with a mean of 4.12, especially since the research foci was on transnational gang activity. Two more perceived concerns by law enforcement were the increasing concern for human trafficking ($\mu=4.00$), and increase concern for illegal prescription drugs ($\mu=4.00$), see table 8.

Insert Table 8 Here

Agencies were then probed about the type of multiagency collaboration and the types of programs they employ to address issues of transnational gangs. One agency responded that they are currently a part of Operation Border Star. Operation Border Star is an intense multiagency effort that attacks crime in targeted regions affected by dangerous spillovers. The operation is a state funded initiative created in 2005 by the governor office in the state of Texas. The United States Border Patrol along with local agencies work together to combat drugs, crime, and gangs. One agency mentioned they work closely with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), while 5 other agencies work with the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Two agencies highlighted that they collaborate with the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program (HIDTA). This is a federal program created by congress in 1988 with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act. The purpose of the program is to reduce drug trafficking and

production in the United States. Twenty four agencies have also noted that they have some form of gang unit and 11 agencies stated that they have prevention and intervention programs in place, see table 9.

Table 9: Multiagency Collaboration

Collaborative Agencies	Number
Border Star	1
DEA	1
FBI	5
HIDTA	2
Gang Unit	24
Prevention/Intervention	11

The data collected indicates that transnational gangs are active and there is a genuine perceived concern by law enforcement agencies. However, there was not enough data collected to conclude that transnational gangs pose a major threat to US society as portrayed by the media and other social outlets. Nevertheless, law enforcement should not deny the existence of gangs in their jurisdiction nor over exaggerate their presence, these sentiments make for bad policy and decision making. As indicated by the results, the major concern of transnational gangs is the perceived notion of drug distribution in the United States, followed by victimization. There are two caveats to address before moving forward to implications and solutions. First, the current study is exploratory in nature and only descriptive data was utilized, therefore general inferences can only be concluded. Secondly, the results reveal law enforcement's perceptions of transnational gangs, a group with a unique view of gangs in general.

Implications/Solutions:

In the past, piecemeal measures have targeted symptoms without resolving the root causes of transnational gangs (Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005). According to Johnson & Muhlhausen (2005), to reduce the domestic risk, law enforcement officials at the national and local levels should work together to identify factors that destabilize neighborhoods, to deny time and space for gang activities, and to improve coordination among law enforcement agencies. Although the perception of law enforcement can be at times exaggerated, nevertheless, some gangs are a serious problem requiring U.S. Government (USG) involvement and interagency and international cooperation. Texas and Mexico need to work hand-in-hand to resolve issues requiring transnational cooperation. The gang problem in the region cannot be adequately addressed by each country acting alone. A variety of agencies (i.e. FBI, DEA, Border Starr, HIDTA) must work in cooperation with the assessment countries. There are several strategic and programmatic areas in which these can

effectively address the gang issue.

Transnational initiatives that promote informational exchanges among gang-affected countries such as the United States and Mexico are important. Actors in gang-affected countries cannot act independently to implement effective, sustainable anti-gang strategies and programs. As gangs are transnational in nature, information and trust must flow freely between all countries involved to provide the most impact (Huff, 2002; Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005; Miller, 2009; del Carmen, Rodriguez, Dobbs, Smith, Butler, & Sarver, 2008; Vigil, 1988).

Law enforcement must also balance prevention, intervention, suppression, and reintegration efforts, and all must receive adequate emphasis and funding. The delicate balance cannot properly address concerns if one or two components are missing. Prevention and intervention initiatives coupled with law enforcement approaches are more effective than law enforcement or prevention and/or intervention alone. Only an integrated approach offers a long-term solution to the gang problem (Huff, 2002; Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005; Miller, 2000; del Carmen, Rodriguez, Dobbs, Smith, Butler, & Sarver, 2008; Vigil, 1988). The suppression component should comprise of direct engagement of law enforcement agents to effectively combat gang violence. Since gang activities tend to be concentrated in a limited number of "hot spots" (i.e. border regions) in each country with unique contexts and needs, agency collaboration should support interventions that demonstrate the efficacy of community policing models that provide integrated prevention, intervention, and law enforcement activities tailored to the particular needs of the local community (Huff, 2002; Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005; Miller, 2000; del Carmen, Rodriguez, Dobbs, Smith, Butler, & Sarver, 2008; Vigil, 1988). Intervention activities should also be evaluated to determine their effectiveness, creatively constructed, and take into account local factors. Intervention, and more specifically rehabilitation, programs exist in each country but are largely underfunded, have a number of inherent risks, and are not easily able to provide the multitude of services needed for gang members to engage in alternative lifestyles (Bjerregard, 2010; Huff, 2002; Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005; Miller, 2000; del Carmen, Rodriguez, Dobbs, Smith, Butler, & Sarver, 2008; Vigil, 1988).

Intelligence and accurate information on gangs and gang violence is unavailable along most border regions. While anecdotal information abounds, there is little solid research being conducted on gang activities in along the Texas/Mexico border as it pertains to gangs, security threat groups, and extremist groups. Data on gangs across the region is unreliable and inconsistent (Huff, 2002; Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005; Miller, 2009; del Carmen, et. al, 2008; Vigil, 1988). One lesson that can be learned from this study and others that has come before is that a massive display of force does not fundamentally impact the nature, threat, and perceived threat of transnational gangs along the Texas/Mexico border.

This research will allow for law enforcement on both sides of the border to view a uniform data set that can be used to create effective and efficient policies for law enforcement in both countries. The research can also be utilized to focus on the current deficiencies within the law enforcement agencies, in order to move away from the current “one size fits all” policies. Moreover, a long term-goal of the study is to implement police prevention and intervention programs to combat transnational gang activity. If such programming is implemented it will serve as a service learning apparatus for community, schools, and law enforcement alike.

Conclusion

Many law enforcement agencies, politicians, and citizens who may have a vested interest in the reduction of border gang activity may not always understand the cost. The cost of transnational gangs can be encumbering on many levels. The first cost involves the burden of gang activity in every phase of the criminal justice system, from police to the correctional system. The second are the costs incurred by schools, health services providers, and social service organizations in responding to the consequences of gang activity. Of greater concern, however, are the long-term costs to communities as a result of the loss of potential productivity from a large, and growing, segment of the population (Esbensen, 2000). In the strictest sense, transnational gangs are dangerous in the short term and debilitating in the long-term. There are simply no good outcomes resulting from gangs. Furthermore, by appropriating funds without the knowledge of “what works?” continues to create a cyclical justice system. This type of research will allow for a further inspection on the root cause of transnational gangs. Moreover, the project will allow to appropriate funding into research and programs that are needed to border gangs effective and efficiently.

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