

# Street gangs in the united states



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Street gangs in the United States enjoy a long and flamboyant history. From early in the 1800's until the turn of the century street gangs proliferated, especially in New York City. The widely acclaimed film, "Gangs of New York", starring Leonardo Di Caprio was a reasonably accurate portrayal of gang life and gang warfare in those times. In the heyday of street gangs in New York there were as many as fifty gangs roaming the streets at one time. Many of the gangs specialized in various types of criminal activities including pick pocketing, burglary, robbery, and violence.

Adding to the mayhem, many of the gangs were also constantly at war with each other. Areas such as the Bowery and Five Points were breeding grounds for gangs, gang warfare, and all types of crime. At one point the areas became so dangerous the police, such as they were, refused to go there. The gangs truly owned the streets. During the 1800's there was an influx of immigrants to America searching for freedom and fortune.

Almost half of the recent immigrants were very poor. They had no choice but to be crowded into New York city's eastside tenements that lacked bathroom facilities, heating, dry roofs or fire protection. Many of the immigrants also lacked job skills that were needed in New York, such as factory skills or educational skills that were needed in the new and growing financial district. Recreational activities centered around bar rooms and illegal gambling houses.

Brawling, violence and gang warfare were regular parts of city life. Cockfights, dogfights, and prizefights were common. Many of the young gangsters learned their fighting skills in the prizefights that took place daily

in the barrooms around the city. Besides dogfights where dogs would fight dogs, one of the popular spectator sports was dogs killing rats. Spectators bet on which of their favorite dogs, always a rat terrier, would kill the most rats before the bell. The bar rooms themselves were run by some of New York's best known crooks.

One saloon, called the " Hole in the Wall" was headquarters for a local gang leader known as One-Armed Charley Monell. From there he orchestrated his gang's street activities. The Fourth Ward Hotel on Cherry Street installed trap doors so that victims could be pushed out the trap door and straight into the East River. The crime of choice for these gangsters was to beat and rob sailors then sell them into service aboard ship. The victims who were too badly beaten or not deemed worth selling off were disposed of through the trap doors and would likely drown.

Halfway through the 19th century conditions around certain areas of the city, such as the Fourth Ward, were so bad that almost every house included a saloon, a dance hall or an illegal gambling room. If a well dressed man happened to walk down the wrong street, he had a good chance of being robbed, or killed. Hawkers or prostitutes would try to lure passersby inside buildings or saloons, where their associates could most easily rob them. If a pedestrian mark could not be lured inside, a favorite tactic of gang members was to wait until he walked under an open window.

A bucket of ashes would be poured on a victim's head, temporarily blinding him, while he would be dragged inside to be robbed. Violent street crimes were a way of life for male immigrant gang members. Prostitution was a

common path for women that had recently immigrated to America. They had few choices. Most families could not afford to support a girl beyond the age of about twelve, and girls commonly received no formal education.

Piece work in the garment industry or a life in the theater were possible for women, but it was far more common for girls to be turned out to prostitute. If her own family did not put a girl to work as a prostitute then very likely a lover would. The gangs had flamboyant names, derived sometimes from the name of their leader; their ethnicity; their habits; or their attire. A bowery gang called the Eastmans was named after their leader and founder, Monk Eastman.

The Five Pointers were named after their territory, Five Points where the streets, Little Water, Cross, Anthony, Orange and Mulberry intersected. The leader of another gang, the Dead Rabbits, carried a dead rabbit impaled on a staff into battle with him. Other gangs were called such colorful names like the Bowery Boys, the True Blue Americans, the American Guards, the O'Connell Guards, the Atlantic Guards, the Chickesters, the Roach Guards, the Pug Uglies, the Shirt Tails, the Forty Thieves , the Daybreak Boys, the Swamp Angels, the Slaughter Housers, and many more. At one point there were over fifty separate active street gangs in New York City.

If a gang's headquarters was not a saloon or dance hall, they often used a green grocer for their meeting place. A green grocer, like a small produce stand, would have fruit and vegetables on display in front and rooms in back where gang members could meet, make their plans, and split their take. Once gang members discovered that they needed to ally themselves with

politicians, the politically powerful would often purchase or control the green grocers so that the gangs could run their illegal enterprises in peace. Gangs and politicians found that they needed each other to reach their goals.

Politicians needed the gang members to control the voting - to intimidate voters; to keep away dissenters; to organize voters to vote multiple times; and for physical protection.

Gang members needed politicians to make sure that laws against them were not enforced; and to provide a climate where the gangs could continue their activities. A notable alliance between gang members and politicians was in the days of Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall. Boss Tweed as Alderman for the Fourth Ward proved to the Democratic Party that he could deliver votes and was later elected to Congress. While Boss Tweed was alderman, a position similar to a city councilman, he controlled everything within his district.

Police appointments; saloon licenses; and franchises for streetcars, ferries, and buses; were all subject to Boss Tweed's approval. Tweed also created thousands of new jobs and arranged for the naturalization of hundreds of new immigrants. Tweed not only enjoyed the loyalty of his working gang members but also of the new immigrant citizens as well. Tweed set up a system of kick backs and bribery to grease his political machine; and his career flourished for many years as the epitome of the corrupt politician.

The symbiotic relationship between corrupt politicians and street gangs set the stage for more organized crime that was to come. Although street violence was still common, gang members learned how to organize their activities so that they could maximize their profits. Extortion protection

schemes were a common gang activity where gangs would demand payment from businesses and stores in exchange for protecting the stores from burglary, vandalism, and violence. In fact, the businesses and shopkeepers had no choice, but to pay the gang members, because it was those gangs that would perpetrate the violence if they did not. As street gangs became more and more organized they evolved into what we commonly refer to as organized crime. Over the next fifty or sixty years organized crime, mainly known as the Mafia or La Cosa Nostra, had power.

If separate street gangs formed they would either be swallowed up by the more powerful Mafia and put to work. Or they would be completely destroyed. In the late 1960's a street gang known as the Crips formed in South Central Los Angeles. By this time in history the Mafia's power had been severely undermined by federal government crime control programs. During the 70's the Crips formed branch gangs in Chicago, Kansas City, and New York, all wearing the identifying blue bandana. The Crips actively recruited children as young as eleven years old to join their ranks.

A rival gang called the Bloods was formed in Compton, California around the same time. Their identifying color is red. They quickly recruited enough gang members to form over seventy-five gangs around the U. S. , all pledging allegiance and loyalty to the Bloods. Both Crips and Bloods were black gangs and both made their money selling illegal drugs.

Crack cocaine was the popular street drug, and there was plenty of money to be made. Leaders of both the Bloods and the Crips enjoyed flashy gold jewelry and expensive cars. And both gangs were violent. They were

viciously violent against each other, as rivals for territory and money; and violent against anyone that tried to thwart their efforts while selling illegal drugs. An unintended consequence of federal law enforcement's efforts to suppress these gangs may have been that, in fact, law enforcement helped them to expand their membership base. Partly as a safety precaution for other inmates, when several gang members were arrested, they were sent to different correctional facilities.

Sometimes gang members were sent to prisons in far flung areas so that their communication with compatriots on the outside would be made more difficult. Prison officials also strived to separate rival gangs from each other while incarcerated in order to keep the peace for the general prison population. However, incarcerated gang members continued to recruit new members from inside prison. In the seventeenth century the New World was being settled by both the British and the French. Privateer ships were hired by each of those country's monarchs to protect their own shipping vessels while bringing supplies to America and returning goods to England and France.

In theory, the privateers were to only attack ships displaying the flag of the opposing country. English privateers were hired to attack French ships, and vice versa. Payment for the privateers was to be a cut of the goods and supplies they seized after successfully attacking and taking over an opposing ship. Privateer captains soon learned that they could greatly increase their income by expanding their aggressive activities to include any ship that might be carrying cargo. Captain Kidd, best known as a notorious pirate, was first hired by the English crown to attack and seize the cargo of French ships.

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On his first mission, after struggling to recruit an experienced crew, then the death by disease of many crew members while at sea; Kidd in desperation and opportunism seized and plundered a neutral Dutch vessel, ignoring Holland' s neutrality. Emboldened by his success Kidd continued a more profitable career as a pirate, than he would ever have realized had he stayed within the law. The American colonists supported the pirate's criminal enterprise by purchasing their stolen goods on the black market. The colonists needed or wanted the goods that the pirates seized and likely would not have been able to buy them for as little, if at all, through legitimate sources.

The pirates were welcome in the coastal colonies by the citizens and the colonies leaders alike. Many colonial governments were corrupt and offered the pirates safe harbor in their ports. Without this cooperation from the public piracy could never have flourished. Among experts and theorists there are some competing definitions of street gangs.

Their theories converge around a few key points. In 1988 Fagan interviewed around 150 gang members in South Central Los Angeles. He divided his findings into four groups which he states are the four different types of gangs. The " social gang" engages in relatively few delinquent activities and confines their substance abuse to mostly alcohol and marijuana. Generally social gang members have little or no involvement with illegal drug sales. The " party gang" also has a relatively low involvement with criminality, but members do commit vandalism, especially graffiti.



Many gang members sell drugs to support their habits, or the habits of their fellow gang members, but the sale of drugs is not a completely organized criminal activity. The largest group of gang members that Fagan found, he labeled "serious delinquents". Serious delinquents are involved in ongoing drug sales. Their other criminal activities are likely to be serious offenses and often violent.

Serious delinquents also have a more formalized hierarchical structure than either the party gangs or the social gangs. The last group that Fagan labeled, he called the "young organizations". Although having fewer members than serious delinquent groups the young organizations have an extensive involvement with drug sales; and serious involvement with illegal drug use. Their drug use may have a direct relationship with other criminal activities, such as drug dealing, violence, and thefts. Young organizations also are characterized as being highly cohesive and organized. Huff studied youth gangs in Cleveland and Columbus Ohio and came to some similar conclusions as did Fagan.

In Huff's definition of gangs he combined Fagan's social gangs and party gangs into one group he called "hedonistic gangs". Although gang members may commit some crime and sell some drugs, their primary goals are to spend time together and have fun. The next tier of definitions of gangs that correlates to Fagan's serious delinquent gangs, Huff called "instrumental gangs". Gang members in instrumental gangs commit property crimes and also sell drugs. Their drug sales tend to be completed by individual gang members, but not as an organized criminal activity.

Huff's third classification of gangs, he called "predatory gangs". Members of predatory gangs are likely to use and sell highly addictive illegal drugs such as crack cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin. Gang members may sell drugs to finance other criminal activities and to allow them to afford sophisticated weapons. Huff asserted that these predatory gangs are breeding grounds for more sophisticated criminal groups. Yet another definition of street gangs was put forth by Curry and Spergel in 1988.

They relied on a theory of social disorganization to explain the existence of gangs. And stated: Gangs are residual social subsystems often characterized by competition for status and, more recently, income opportunity through drug sales. They are organizations concerned with territoriality, status, and controlling human behavior. For disadvantaged youths, uncertain in the face of the unstable urban social world, the gang is responsive and provides quasi-stable, efficient, meaningful social, and perhaps economic structures. In gang membership, there is opportunity to obtain the psychic rewards of personal identity and minimal standards of acceptable status and sometimes the material benefits of criminal income. (pp.

400-401). Even though Huff and Fagan's gang theories are completely different from Curry and Spergel's they are not mutually exclusive. Many different crime theories put forth environmental factors as causes for people to be attracted to a criminal lifestyle. This group of criminological theory is often referred to as cultural transmission theories and is composed of several different sub-theories.

Criminologists in the middle years of the twentieth century such as Shaw, McKay and Miller believed that inner city youths break laws because they have a different value system than mainstream society. Criminal behavior is passed down through family systems as a way of life, and in their culture, viewed as acceptable behavior. In 1971 Schrag theorized that many lower socioeconomic class people have no interest in socially acceptable measures or means to status, success or wealth. In essence Schrag believed that criminals choose to be criminals, rather than the theory that some individuals turn to criminal behavior as a survival mechanism.

Sutherland suggested that criminal behavior is learned in a process of interaction with other people in small groups. He called this theory “differential association theory”. Sutherland believed that the skills and rationalizations that people use to justify a criminal lifestyle can occur anywhere, and the strains of poverty and inner city life are not true factors. The important factor in his theory is that people learn criminal behavior from others within highly socialized groups. Individuals learn criminal skills such as stealing cars and selling drugs from others in their immediate group, either by direct training or through example. Thorsten Sellin first put forth a theory of culture conflict and crime in 1938.

In this theory he suggests that some groups, particularly recent immigrants, may have different codes of behavior in their new country than that which was acceptable in their country of origin. This could support a basis for reasoning why certain immigrant groups were drawn to organized crime. However, I believe this theory wears thin at our current point in history. This may well have been a valid argument for reasons to engage in crime in the

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early days of New York City's gangs, where members of ethnic groups banded together because they shared common traits and values.

Nowadays we would consider this theory disingenuous and even racist. It may explain past behavior of ethnic based gangs and organized crime, but it does not provide much excuse or explanation for criminal behavior today.

Although stealing property is likely illegal everywhere on the planet; immigrants from other countries may have different views and traditions as to what constitutes ownership. Some countries still consider women to be chattel, property, to be bought and sold. However, I believe those types of practices in other countries are irrelevant, and despite cultural traditions and views immigrants, recent or not, must abide by the same laws as everyone else. Another theoretical explanation for the causes of criminal behavior and organized crime is called ethnic succession.

This theory began with the work of Daniel Bell in 1953 and was later expanded upon by Francis Ianni in 1972 and 1974. The basis of this theory is that the most ethnic groups which arrived to the U. S. most recently have the fewest political and economic opportunities. Therefore the most recent groups to immigrate are the most likely to engage in criminal behavior.

And the ethnic group that arrived before them would have moved up on the socioeconomic ladder towards mainstream success and relative wealth.