

Latino Gang Migration

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Abstract

Various regions of the U.S. have recently witnessed the emergence of Latino street gangs for the first time ever. This presents a unique opportunity to analyze these groups in their earliest stages of formation to advance a theoretical understanding of street gang proliferation. While clearly linked to the growth of new Latino communities in various non-traditional destinations, it is not known exactly how or why street gangs are now forming. Most research on gang emergence in new locations claims it is a “homegrown” problem, a function of poverty and deteriorating social conditions. An alternate view, common among law enforcement officials, suggests that gang members strategically migrate from other places in the U.S. or Latin America as a way to expand their criminal operations. This proposal calls for a field-work research program to help understand what is driving the formation of these groups.

Introduction

This challenge question is focused on a very timely topic with an application to various disciplines in the social sciences. It pertains to the recent proliferation of Latino street gangs in regions of the U.S. where they have never before surfaced. We are currently witnessing the early stages of a phenomenon that is sure to continue into the foreseeable future, and it is a topic that has remained virtually untouched by academics (see Yearwood and Rhyne 2007 for a rare exception).

The existing research and its limitations

The topic of Latino gang emergence in new locales is part of a broader body of existing research on street gang proliferation. Over the past several decades, street gang subculture has spread to suburbs, rural areas, small to medium sized cities, and other atypical gang locations. The most authoritative voices on this topic find little support for the role of migration in the spread of gangs, citing changes in local socioeconomic conditions as the primary mechanism in the emergence of gangs in such places (e.g. Klein and Maxson, 2006). This “homegrown” perspective has permeated our understanding of this social problem for several decades (Hagedorn 1988). Yet, the perspective is limited to the tendency of African American gangs to form “satellite” branches in smaller communities adjacent to larger cities where the gang originated. The case of Latino gangs primarily composed of foreign-born members is virtually untouched as a research topic, however. While the issue has been on the radar of federal and

Latino Gang Migration

local law enforcement agencies for the past decade or so, very little academic research has surfaced.

This white paper proposes the creation of a research program that examines Latino gang formation in its relative infancy. Whereas one criticism of the extant research on gang migration and proliferation is that it is over-reliant on the perceptions of law enforcement personnel (Klein and Maxson 2006), there is a need to approach the issue with a wider array of methodologies. An approach that is useful for preliminary exploration of social phenomena is to employ ethnographic and qualitative methods seen in sociology, anthropology, and their related sub-disciplines. This allows researchers to go to the source of the action to gain a richer, more detailed understanding of the process as it unfolds. This work would have implications for revisiting long-held, core theoretical principles related to street gang formation, dating back to the 1950's, but that are still widely relied upon today.

Resources needed

While the interest may be there, currently, there are not very many academics with the particular skill-set needed to navigate the world of immigrant Latino gangs to study them in a meaningful way. Aside from a keen interest in gang studies, this researcher or research team would need to possess qualitative/ethnographic research skills, be somewhat fluent in Spanish, street smart, trustworthy, and have a good relationship with their institution's human subjects review board. The idea (not a novel one in gang studies by far) is to gain entry to the underworld of street gangs, to interact with, observe, and validly interview the membership to help determine how and why their delinquent group formed in this locale.

Several of the added challenges and nuances here are that much of the membership of this type of gang is comprised of undocumented immigrants who are at risk of deportation, and therefore extremely difficult to locate, build rapport with, and gain trust with. Thus, a method of employing gatekeepers that are members of this in-group is also needed. Currently, undocumented immigrants are not allowed to work on federally funded research projects. The eligible regions for this endeavor would include non-border states with Mexico, but a special focus on the Midwest and Carolina regions is warranted, where immigration has fueled the rapid growth of Latino communities since the early 1990's.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration potential

The implications of this work for engaging Latino scholars in law, criminology, deviance, and criminal justice are clear, yet the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration is immense. As such studies would be best contextualized by an analysis of Latino population growth in the region or specific location, it would include methods used in social demography. Since a key objective of the research is to understand the causal forces giving rise to the emergence of such groups in these new locales, grasping the origin of the gang(s) under study lends itself to sociology, cultural anthropology, and history. Finally, scholars from the language arts and

Latino Gang Migration

linguistics disciplines might be interested in analyzing the dialect, vernacular, and other speech patterns of this population.

The latter becomes especially relevant in the event that research on the causal factors in this gang proliferation are largely attributable to migration. Because many of the gang names used by the newly emerged groups are identical to those in the Southwestern U.S., the role of migration could be prominent. Scholars of culture might be interested, then in learning how well the subcultural components of the particular gang travel. Aside from criminal behavior, these cultural elements include clothing, language, gestures and hand-signs, attitudes, credo, and the rules and regulations of a particular group.

Research questions

The most basic and obvious research questions this program would address are “why” and “how” these groups have emerged in the new regions and locales. Clearly, the issue has much to do with Latino immigration in general. The pressing issues involve whether the gang formations are happenstance by-products of this immigration or whether the groups strategically operate under a franchising model. By contrast, a competing hypothesis is that these gangs are in-fact homegrown and are simply emulating the Latino gangs in the southwestern region and Latin American countries. Familiarity with the gang-related subcultural elements of a given group (colors, signs, symbols, credo, etc.) enables delinquent individuals to start up a new *set* of the group in the new locale without necessarily having been “sent” to do so, or without the knowledge or permission of another group. A related perspective emphasizes the role of the hip-hop and rap music industry and most recently, online social networking sites in this transmission process, i.e. the “copycat” hypothesis. Certain groups now have a presence in many medium to large U.S. cities (e.g. Sureño, Latin King, MS-13), but their connectedness to counterparts in other, larger, and perhaps “original” places, if known to law enforcement, are not yet documented in social science.

References

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