

# Youth Gangs in the Print Media

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The popular image of youth gangs is largely dependent on law enforcement data and subsequent media reinforcement of these data in the popular press. Recent research on youth gangs, however, calls into question the accuracy of these portrayals. In spite of an ever-increasing body of research that contradicts the popular stereotype of gangs, the media perpetuates this inaccuracy. In a review of all gang-related articles appearing in the nation's "big three" newsweeklies (*Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*) between 1980 and May 2006, we conclude that there was a strong tendency to provide stereotypical depiction of gangs and gang members that promote misperceptions about youth gangs, their members, and their group characteristics. Youth gangs are problematic enough in reality without the media contributing to exaggerations of their attributes that are associated with violence and organizational capacity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Youth violence has garnered considerable media attention during the past 40 years and much of this attention has included the role of youth gangs. Perrone and Chesney-Lind (1997), for example, report that almost 50 percent of the youth crime articles reported over a 10 year period in Hawaiian newspapers dealt specifically with youth gangs. In this paper we focus our attention on media portrayals of this subset of youth violence, with a specific interest in contrasting media depictions of youth gangs with empirical findings derived from studies of gangs and gang-involved youth. Several studies have examined youth gangs in the media (e.g., McCorkle and Miethe 1998; Perrone and Chesney-Lind 1997; Thompson, Young, and Burns 2000; and Zatz 1987) from a social construction of reality perspective, assessing the extent to which the media contributed to the creation of a moral panic in the studied communities. Our objective in this paper is to examine the extent to which the nation's three major newsweeklies describe gangs relative to research findings.

The popular image of youth gangs is largely dependent on law enforcement data and subsequent media reinforcement of these data in the popular press. Recent research on youth gangs, however, calls into question the accuracy of these portrayals. Surveys of adolescent samples conducted during the past two decades suggest that while significant differences exist between gang and non-gang youth, gang youth nonetheless mirror the youth in their communities. In communities characterized by a high concentration of racial or ethnic minorities, gang members, by default, will tend to be minority youth. In predominantly white communities, gang members, will more likely be white. Additionally, just as males and females each tend to comprise half of the juvenile population,

girls account for more than an insignificant number of gang youth. Furthermore, these gang-involved girls commit a variety of illegal acts similar to the gang boys. Adolescents are involved in a wide array of activities at school and in the community at large; that is, they attend school, participate in athletics and other after-school activities, hold jobs, and attend religious services. Gang youth are not different in that they are not disenfranchised and alienated from the community; they attend school, participate in school activities and athletics, have jobs, and attend religious services.

With respect to gang structure and group characteristics, the notion that gangs are highly organized, often around the distribution of drugs, has been refuted by numerous researchers (e.g., Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998; Fleisher 1998; Klein 1995). In spite of this ever-growing body of research that contradicts the popular stereotype of gangs, the media tends to perpetuate this inaccurate stereotyping of gangs and their members. In a review of all gang-related articles appearing in three of the nation's top newsweeklies (*Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*) between 1980 and May 2006, we found a strong tendency to provide stereotypical depiction of gangs and gang members that promote misperceptions about youth gangs, their members, and their group characteristics.

### ***Literature Review***

In this paper, we explore media portrayals of gangs and gang members. First, however, we provide a brief review of gang research, focusing on definitional issues and then turning our attention to gang and gang member characteristics. When we use the terms "gang" and "gang member", to what are we referring? Without paying attention to this core question, we easily arrive at the following stereotypical description of gang members; they are described as male, members of an ethnic or racial minority, from the inner-city or at least an urban area, and remain members for life. With respect to gangs, they are depicted in the following manner: an organized group comprised of well-defined roles for members (often associated with the notion of organized drug distribution and sales), with satellite sets across the country, and well-established leaders. Additionally, the gang is portrayed as being heavily armed and involved in a wide array of illegal, especially violent, crimes. One problem with this picture is that it does not describe the typical gang or gang member. This gang stereotype is derived largely from Los Angeles and Chicago gangs and is not representative of the majority of gangs found elsewhere. To what extent, however, are these images advanced by media presentations and to what extent are efforts made by the print media to provide insight into the complexity of this social phenomenon?

### ***Gang Definitional Issues***

There is considerable disagreement between and among law enforcement and research communities as to what constitutes a gang and who is a gang member (e.g., Ball and Curry 1995; Decker and Kempf-Leonard 1991; Esbensen, Winfree, He and Taylor 2001; Klein 1969, 1995; Miller 1975, 1980; Sullivan 2006). This disagreement and subsequent failure to employ universal definitions of youth gangs and gang membership has serious implications for gang research and gang-related public policy. For example, depending on the definition applied, research on the extent and nature of the "gang problem" faces three possible outcomes: (1) accurately stating the nature and complexity of the gang problem; (2) underestimating the magnitude of the gang problem with a far too narrow definition; or (3) overestimating the gang problem by applying a definition that is far too broad, capturing individuals, groups and behavior that are of little interest from a policy

perspective. Clearly, the definition utilized may also affect the characteristics of gang members and gangs.

The bulk of gang research tends to include the following criteria as part of a definition of gangs: a social **group** that uses **symbols**, engages in verbal and nonverbal communications to declare their “**gang-ness**,” that has a sense of **permanence** and gang identified **territory or turf**, and, lastly, is involved in **criminal activity**. As Bursik and Grasmick (1993) have further noted, the first two criteria are easily met by a number of social groups, including Greek fraternities and sororities, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and Police Athletic League members, among others.

In the mid 1990s, Maxson and Klein (1995) significantly advanced the definitional debate by reporting on their findings from a large-scale survey of law enforcement agencies; they found that most of the reported gangs did not fit the stereotypical image of youth gangs of the fifties. In fact, they were able to classify most American youth gangs into one of five categories: traditional, neo-traditional, compressed, collective, and specialty gangs. American youth gangs, it appears, do not come in one size or shape. Two of these gang types appear to be more common and account for a large number of new gangs and gang members, especially in “emerging” gang cities: the neo-traditional (relatively short history, territorial, with crime versatility and more than 50 members) and compressed (small groups with fewer than 50 members, brief history, narrow age range of members, may or may not be territorial, and versatile crime patterns) gangs. The “traditional” gang, the one that is characterized in movies, popular culture, and law enforcement descriptions, was found to be relatively rare and comprised a small subset of all the gangs reported in the Maxson and Klein research. Contrary to these findings, however, characteristics associated with the traditional gang type continue to be presented as universal to all gangs, with little or no attention paid to the other four types. Thus the prevailing portrayal of gangs reflects the reality of a minority of gangs and gang members in the United States.

### ***Gang Member Characteristics***

During the past twenty years, gang research has identified a veritable proliferation of gangs throughout the US (and the entire globe for that matter – Decker and Weerman 2005; Klein et al. 2001). Surveys of law enforcement agencies have documented gangs in suburban and rural areas (e.g., Klein 1995; Curry, Ball, and Fox 1994; Curry, Ball, and Decker 1996) – in fact, recent survey results from the National Youth Gang Center’s national survey reported gangs in all fifty states with the exception of Vermont (Egley et al. 2004). Along with this expansion of the geographical scope of the gang problem have come additional insights into the American gang at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One important question that we will not tackle in this paper and one that has received scant attention is: does the identification of gangs across the U.S. represent a proliferation of gangs or is it a matter of simply identifying previously unacknowledged gangs? [In a recent publication that tangentially addresses this issue, Sullivan (2006) explores the extent to which gang studies may contribute to the reification of gangs and perpetuation of the gang problem.]

Gangs have been described historically as primarily a male phenomenon. Law enforcement estimates generally indicate that more than 90 percent of gang members are male (Curry, Ball, and Fox 1994). Early references to female gang members were usually restricted to their involvement in sexual activities or as tomboys; they were rarely included in any serious discussion of the gang. What little was said about gang girls suggested that they were socially inept, maladjusted, sexually

promiscuous, and/or suffered from low self-esteem. Recent survey research, however, suggests that females account for more than one-third of youth gang members (Bjerregaard and Smith 1993; Esbensen and Winfree 1998). In addition, a number of contemporary researchers have moved beyond the stereotypical notion that female gang members are merely auxiliary members of male gangs and that they are not that dissimilar from gang boys (Campbell 1991; Deschenes and Esbensen 1999; Fishman 1995; Miller 2001; Peterson, Miller, and Esbensen 2001).

Another recurring myth about the demographics of gang youth is that they are almost exclusively members of ethnic or racial minorities. Law enforcement estimates, and studies based on law enforcement samples, indicate that 85 to 90 percent of gang members are African American or Hispanic (Covey, Menard, and Franzese 1997). However, findings from the National Youth Gang Survey indicate that these estimates may overstate the minority representation of gang members. The survey revealed that the race or ethnicity of gang members is closely tied to the size of that group in the community. While Caucasians comprised only 11 percent of gang members in large cities (where most gang research has taken place), they accounted for approximately 30 percent of gang members in small cities and rural counties. Lending credence to the law enforcement estimates are ethnographers' depictions of gang youth, usually based on research conducted in socially disorganized communities in Los Angeles, New York, or other urban areas characterized by high concentrations of minority residents (e.g., Campbell 1984; Decker and van Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 1988; Moore 1991; Vigil 1988). As research expands to more representative samples of the general population, a redefinition of the racial and ethnic composition of gang members is likely. Esbensen and Lynskey (2001) reported that community-level demographics were reflected in the composition of youth gangs; that is, gang members were white in primarily white communities and African American in predominantly African American communities.

It is worthwhile to note that early gang studies provided a rich source of information about white urban gangs. These early gangs were usually described according to nationality and/or ethnicity, not race. Researchers began to identify gang members by race in the 1950s (Spergel 1995). This change in gang composition is closely tied to the social disorganization of urban areas and the research focus on urban youth. Covey and colleagues (1997:240) suggested that the scarcity of non-Hispanic, white, ethnic gangs may be attributable to the smaller proportion of non-Hispanic European Americans residing in neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization (that is, high rates of poverty, mobility, welfare dependency, and single-parent households).

Family characteristics of gang members, such as family structure, parental education, and income, also have been revised because the traditional stereotype is too restrictive—gang youth are found in intact two-parent, single-parent, and recombined families. In addition, gang youth are not limited to homes in which parents have low educational achievement or low incomes. Klein (1995:75–76) summarizes gang characteristics as follows (emphasis added): “In regard to who joins street gangs, then, first, it is not sufficient to say that gang members come from lower-income areas, from minority populations, or from homes more often characterized by absent parents or reconstituted families. It is not sufficient because most youths from such areas, such groups, and such families do *not* join gangs.”

The community is the domain examined most frequently in regard to both the emergence of gangs and the factors associated with joining gangs. Numerous studies indicate that poverty,

unemployment, the absence of meaningful jobs, and social disorganization contributes to the presence of gangs (Curry and Thomas 1992; Fagan 1990; Hagedorn 1988, 1991; Huff 1990; Vigil 1988). There is little debate that gangs are more prominent in urban areas and that they are more likely to emerge in economically distressed neighborhoods. However, as previously stated, surveys conducted by NYGC have identified the existence of youth gangs in rural and suburban communities. Except for law enforcement identification of this phenomenon, few systematic studies have explored these rural and suburban youth gangs. Winfree, Vigil-Backstrom, and Mays (1994) studied youth gang members in Las Cruces, NM, and Esbensen and Lynskey (2001) reported on gang youth in rural areas and small cities that were included in an 11-site study. In spite of this growing body of research documenting the diversity of settings in which gangs persist, the image of American youth gangs continues to be characterized by urban social disorganization and economic marginalization; the housing projects or barrios of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York are viewed as the stereotypical homes of youth gang members.

### ***Gang Activities***

Gangs and gang members are engaged in a number of activities other than gang-related or criminal activities. Research has found that, throughout most of the day, gang members are not dissimilar from other adolescents; they attend school, work conventional jobs, hang out with friends, and eat meals with their family (e.g., Decker and van Winkle 1996; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher 1993; Fleisher 1998; Klein 1995). We are reminded of the apt description of gang life provided by Malcolm Klein when he stated that the only thing more boring than gang life is the life of the researcher observing gang members. Contrary to popular opinion, criminal activity and violence in particular are relatively rare occurrences in the context of other gang activities. However, having said that, it is still a widely documented finding that gang members are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime. Thornberry and Burch (1997), for example, reported that gang members accounted for 86 percent of all serious offenses in the Rochester Youth Development Study sample. It should also be noted that there is considerable variation in the activities of different gangs. Some gangs are best classified as drug gangs, others as violent gangs, and yet others as lacking specialization. With respect to violence in particular, Howell (1998: 9) notes that the “levels of gang violence differ from one city to another..., from one community to another..., from one gang to another..., and even among cliques with the same gang...” The one constant is that most gangs and gang members engage in violent crime at a rate higher than nongang youths in the same environment. To accurately describe gang crime is an important task for law enforcement and the media. Youth gangs are responsible for a significant amount of crime: however, it does not serve the public well to demonize or otherwise exaggerate the gangs’ violent offenses.

### ***Current Study***

To assess the extent to which the media help to perpetuate the stereotypical image of youth gangs we examined coverage of gangs in the nation’s three most popular newsweeklies (*Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*) over a 26-year period (January, 1980 through May, 2006). Referred to as the “Big Three” newsweeklies, these publications were selected to represent mainstream news coverage that targets a large and diverse readership. [At the end of 2003, circulation estimates for the three magazines were 4.1 million, 3.1 million, and 2 million for *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* respectively (journalism.org).] We chose this time period largely to coincide with the timing of the youth violence epidemic in that youth gangs were widely credited with contributing to the epidemic of youth violence of the early 1990s. To capture

the period preceding the epidemic, we included the early 1980s, which was a period of relatively little attention to youth gangs by law enforcement and researchers (Bookin-Weiner and Horowitz 1983). We also wanted to capture the period following the peak years of youth violence (that were also characterized by growth of gang research) to assess whether gang coverage changed with reduced levels of violence.

To identify relevant articles, we searched for the word “gang” in the headlines or title of all articles appearing during this time period. We also conducted an additional search of articles in which the word “gang” appeared in the first paragraph. This latter procedure produced a large number of irrelevant articles so we restricted our search to those articles in which the word gang appeared in the headline. This approach produced an initial sample of 122 articles. Our next step was to read these articles to determine their appropriateness for the subsequent analysis. We found that a number of these articles did not deal with street or youth gangs; rather, the word gang in the headline referred to political gangs, international gangs with no ties to the United States, motorcycle gangs, and chain gangs (e.g., “The New Capital Gang”, “Gorbachev Faces Down a Gang of Four”, “The Gangs of Belfast”). This reduced our pool of relevant articles to 38. Upon further consideration, we also decided to exclude four brief updates included in the “Notebook” section of *Time* or the “Periscope” section of *Newsweek* - typically 2 to 3 sentences describing a situation or providing an update of a story previously reported – as these brief reports tended to be factual with little, if any, descriptive information (e.g., “A Gang Leader’s Fate”, “Urban Gangs”, “China Gangs”). Restricting our sample in this manner reduced the sample to 34 articles for analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of Article Selection

Newsweeklies	Total Number of Articles 1980-2006	Relevant Articles
<i>Newsweek</i>	45	18
<i>U.S. News &amp; World Report</i>	39	7
<i>Time</i>	38	9
TOTAL	122	34

The resultant 34 articles were read and analyzed according to a coding scheme that focused our attention on gang and gang member characteristics. The articles were organized on the following dimensions: definitional content, sex, minority status, urbanicity, level of gang organization, and degree of criminal involvement, especially violence. Specifically, we used the following criteria to assess whether the articles provided support for gang stereotypes:

- Definition – no attempt to specify whether the gang is youth, adult, prison, etc.
- Sex – reinforces impression that most, if not all, gang members are male
- Minority – if race/ethnicity was mentioned in the article, gangs or gang members were characterized as minority members
- Urban – focus on urban setting
- Organization – description about the gang as an organized enterprise
- Delinquent/criminal – focus on illegal activities of gangs

Before detailing the results of our analyses, we provide some descriptive information about the actual articles. As can be seen in Table 2, newsweeklies devoted more time to coverage of gangs

during the 1980s than they did in the two subsequent decades. Furthermore, *Newsweek* appears to bestow more attention to gang issues than do the other two newsweeklies, while *U.S. News and World Report* assigns low newsworthiness to gangs (an article has yet to appear on this topic in the 2000s). The finding that the media devoted more attention to gangs in the 1980s is interesting since there was considerably less “gang research” conducted in the 1980s than in the 1990s and the youth violence epidemic (for which gang activity is partially blamed) peaked in 1993.

Table 2 Distribution of Articles across Time and by Newsweekly

Number of Articles	1980s	1990s	2000-May 2006	TOTAL
<i>Newsweek</i>	11	4	3	18
<i>U.S. News &amp; World Report</i>	5	2	0	7
<i>Time</i>	3	3	3	9
TOTAL	19	9	6	34

Table 3 provides information on the word counts of each newsweekly covering gangs and gang members. The average word count for all articles was 1,207, with *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* each averaging less than 1,000 words per article while articles in *Time* were considerably longer (1,921 words). Combining word counts and number of articles, *Newsweek* and *Time* devoted about the same amount of attention to gangs during the examined period whereas *U.S. News and World Report* paid relatively little attention to the gang issues.

Table 3 Article Length and Word Count of Articles

	Total Number Of Articles	Total Number of Words	Average Length of Article	Word Count Range
<i>Newsweek</i>	18	17,917	995	237-3,679
<i>U.S. News &amp; World Report</i>	7	6,955	994	573-1,550
<i>Time</i>	9	17,285	1,921	572-5,264

## Results

We divide our discussion into the following sections: definitional; gang member characteristics, specifically sex and race/ethnicity; gang organizational characteristics, specifically size, hierarchical, and migration/exportation to other areas; and involvement in violence. As discussed in the literature review, gangs come in many shapes and sizes and no one definition or description is appropriate or applicable to the majority of gangs. Our first emphasis in examining these newsweekly articles, therefore, turns to the issue of definition.

## Defining Gangs

One objective of reporters and their employers is to inform their readership. We realize that this objective does not necessarily include education; that is, elaborating ad infinitum as academics and researchers are prone to do. However, in order to inform, reporters must establish parameters and qualify their stories so that they accurately report the facts. With regard to defining gangs, none of the articles reviewed included an attempt by the reporter to provide a description of their topic. Many of the articles did, however, include qualifying descriptors of gangs that can be seen as an attempt to limit their story to a particular “type” of gang. For instance, several of the reviewed articles were specifically about prison gangs, drug gangs, and Vietnamese gangs. Throughout these

articles, there appears an underlying set of assumptions about the nature of gangs and gang members that is consistent with the stereotypes described above. The qualifying terms did not succeed in identifying the particular gang(s) as somehow unique or different from all other gangs in terms of their hierarchical organization, profit-making, violent enterprise. All gangs, regardless of story or specifics, were portrayed in this manner.

When discussing a prison gang, one reporter commented: "From its early days as a self-defense unit, the prison gang called La Nuestra Familia (Our Family) has grown into a regiment of disciplined predators, unencumbered by any rules except its own rough code.... For an untutored group, Nuestra Familia demonstrates an M.B.A.'s talent for organization" (*Newsweek* 2/1/82).

Describing a "drug" gang in 1987, *Newsweek* reports: "Black gangs have been a part of the L.A. landscape since the '50s. Back then their activities were largely confined to petty crimes and small-scale marijuana and PCP dealing. But the arrival of the cocaine derivative crack five years ago has created a billion-dollar underground economy.... The volume of coke is so great that gang members who once were the musclemen for big dealers are now dealing themselves" (*Newsweek* 4/27/87).

More than a decade later, the following account of gang involvement in drug distribution appeared in *Newsweek* (11/1/99): "Highly organized and viciously paranoid, Chicago's Gangster Disciples amounted to an unbreakable drug cartel.... with 50,000 members in 35 states.... The GDs had spread their drug peddling to cities from coast to coast .... with profit estimates at more than \$100 million a year."

And, in 2006, *Newsweek* described the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang as "a nationwide extortion and drug-trafficking enterprise from behind bars" (2/13/06).

These descriptors of the gangs are all well and good but do not assist in the actual defining of gangs. What makes these groups gangs as opposed to criminal organizations? Are they one and the same? Are the descriptors actually definers of what constitutes a gang? That is, are organization and drug dealing necessary components of a gang? Based on these articles, that would be a fair conclusion.

### ***Gang member characteristics***

#### ***Sex***

Much of the prior research on gangs has presented a male perspective. Most gang researchers have been males and they have studied male gang members. As a result, female gangs and female gang members have been poorly represented. Anne Campbell (1984) and subsequent commentators have highlighted the extent to which the history of gang research is tainted in terms of including females. While law enforcement data continue to perpetuate a chauvinistic perspective, gang research has identified considerable involvement in gangs and gang activities on the part of females. Two large-scale surveys conducted in Denver (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993) and Rochester (Bjerregaard and Smith 1993) reported that females accounted for ¼ to almost ½ of gang members in their samples. Furthermore, in the 1960s, Klein and Crawford (1995) reported that 200 of the 800 (i.e., 25%) gang members were females. At this point in time, it is clear that females comprise a sizable portion of gang members. To what extent do the media accounts reflect this?

Interestingly, very little mention is made of sex in the articles reviewed. In most of the stories, it is simply implied that gang members are male. Coverage of prison gangs was restricted to males, through identification of members by names such as Larry Hoover of the Gangster Disciples. A few stories did specify that the gang members were boys or males or used male pronouns to describe gang members. The following quotes serve as examples: 1) "...block club president Barbara Scott spots a gaggle of young men hanging out on her street in the city's crime-ridden West Side... considering that the young men could be among the 30,000 to 50,000 estimated street-gang members here" (*U.S. News and World Report*, 12/14/98); 2) "During one Monday-evening binge, Hagan, 23, and his 'home boys' decided to have some sport with a rival gang.... Just another rush in a big man's game of cowboys and Indians" (*Time*, 8/24/87); and 3) "He's on trial for murder.... They guide some of the younger boys who are too crazy, who are too quick to reach for a gun .... Some of them try to tell the younger boys to go to school, to get out" (*Time*, 3/16/92).

Some stories do report on girl gang members, but generally in a passive or insignificant role. For instance in a 2001 *Time* article, a female gang member is mentioned in the following context: "... a recent afternoon found him sitting in a small apartment in Highland Park inscribing a bunny design on the shoulder of Guapa, a 19-year-old female gang member" (*Time*, 9/3/01). A 1988 article in *U.S. News and World Report* emphasized the role of women as commodities to be used and discarded. According to a male gang member "You'd spend most of your day sniffing coke and sipping champagne. Most of the day is spent getting mellow and talking tong connections.... But you never stop working.... It's 24-7-365.... We don't party with women. They even dance by themselves. They don't have no choice on sex. After he's finished getting high, he'll go get her..." (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1/18/88).

In yet another story about gangs documenting the spread of gangs to the South, a reporter described the emergence of fifteen gangs modeled after the movie 'The Warriors' in Chattanooga. While one of the gangs was identified as the "Black Angels", a group with all-female membership, the rest of the story focused on male members in terms of name reference (i.e., Vincent and Timothy). The message is that, unless otherwise specified, gang members are male (*Time*, 8/18/86).

While gang membership is portrayed as a predominantly male enterprise, the victims of gang violence do not suffer from the same sexist treatment. Females were regularly identified as the intentional or unintended victims of gang violence.

### *Race/Ethnicity*

Even more directly than the portrayal of gangs as the domain of boys and young men, the newsweekly stories described gang members as racial or ethnic minorities, whether it be African American, Hispanic, Mexican, El Salvadoran, Vietnamese, Chinese or other immigrant group. The gangs were presented as a non-white phenomenon, with the exception of the Aryan Brotherhood. Representative of these accounts are the following:

- "black gangs are still heavily involved in drugs, but Latinos, who make up 60% of L.A.'s 100,000 gangsters, are far less so" (*Time*, 9/3/01);
- "Ramona Penuelas, a housewife who immigrated to America in search of a better life, plans to take her 14-year-old son back to Mexico once he gets out of juvenile detention. Zuelo Menjivar is

from El Salvador, and her dreams for a more prosperous life are so earnest that she has a subscription to FORTUNE magazine but no washing machine. She can't keep her 14-year-old away from the gangs" (*Time*, 6/18/90); and

- "If authorities hope to crush organized crime, their battle plans had better include strategy against dozens of ethnic gangs and 'outlaw' motorcycle clubs. Columbian drug operators, Asian racketeers and gangs such as the Hell's Angels reap hundreds of millions of dollars annually in illegal profits and often are more violent than La Cosa Nostra" (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2/3/86).

It is noteworthy that this presentation of gangs and gang members as racial and/or ethnic minorities persists across time. Whether the article was published in 1986, 1990, or 2001, the picture is clear, the gang problem, with the exception of motorcycle gangs, is a minority problem.

### ***Violence***

In past decades much gang research has recognized the association between gang membership and participation in criminal activities. Although definitions of youth gangs vary, the majority include involvement in crime as a defining element. Accepted stereotypes of gangs and gang members reflected in the media are as violent, organized thugs. Readers are left with the impression that gangs are heavily involved in drug rings, robberies, and drive-by shootings. While research shows that gangs do participate in such activities and commit a disproportionate share of offenses (Thornberry 1998; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher 1993), the frequencies with which they do are greatly overestimated.

Many of the newsweekly articles reported gang members' extensive involvement in violent crimes. In fact, the most prevalent forms of violence among gang members included murder, narcotics, and extortion. In general, despite the type of gang, the articles depicted the gangs as more violent and organized since the 1980s than in any other time period. Illustrating Chicago's youth gangs, *Newsweek* reported "gangs once battled over turf have evolved into small criminal empires fighting for control of thriving narcotics, auto theft, gun-running, and extortion operations... Many of the leaders of Chicago's estimated 110 street gangs are well out of their teens and polished their street schooling in IL prisons... It's worst gang violence since the 1930s" (*Newsweek*, 1/28/85).

The violent incidents are described with graphic detail; rather than stating a murder was committed, the reporter generally provides a grizzly account of an incident. Further, the casual manner in which such incidents are described leave the reader with the distorted view that violence is an everyday, defining feature of a gang. The following account from *U.S. News and World Report* (1984) described the brutality of the Chinese Triads: "One federal drug agent told of finding a New York gang member slashed to ribbons and left hanging on a meat hook, an apparent victim of Triad justice" (11/05/84).

Giving an account of his confessions in the life of a gang, one member informed a reporter from the *U.S. News and World Report* (1988) that it is better to be caught by the police for weapon possession than it is to be caught by your rivals without a weapon. The opposition "cut you into pieces in a bathtub. They dump you into Dempster Dumpsters all over town. All the parts never get found...we call it jointing".

In yet another example of gang violence a 1987 *Newsweek* article described the following incident: “Three armed teenagers rushed the couple, robbed them and then casually shot (him) in the head. The gang members pushed the dying man's wife out of the car, got in and drove away.” A recurring theme in these articles is the notion that violence is a common and necessary occurrence in the lives of gang members. A reporter for *Time* (1992) provided the following depiction: “... They claim their hood—pledge allegiance to their neighborhood gang—and it becomes their whole world, their family. Their loyalty is fierce. The drive-bys are mostly paybacks, revenge killings, sometimes for feuds that started before they were born.”

While gang researchers find a weak association between drug trafficking and violence (Howell 1999; Decker and Van Winkle 1996), the popular image of this relationship is sensationalized by the media's emphasis on gang violence associated with drug sales. Describing the gangs taking over the streets in New York City, *Newsweek* (3/28/88) describes “the gang violence that attends it (the crack epidemic) is spiraling out of control.”

Examination of these newsweeklies gives readers the idea that violence is inevitable within youth and street gangs. If this is the case, however, how can the decline in youth violence since 1993 be reconciled with the increase in youth gangs and gang members during the same time period (see results from the National Youth Gang surveys)?

### ***Hierarchical & Organized***

Few American gangs fit the stereotype of the highly organized and structured gang that tends to be portrayed in the news media. Research suggests that gangs tend to be disorganized and unstructured with poorly-defined leadership. Interestingly, however, the majority of the reviewed articles re-enforced the notion that gangs are organized units. Consistent with this stereotypical view, a *Newsweek* (1/12/81) article detailing the conviction of the Ranger's leader, Jeff Fort, in Chicago depicted Fort as a “charismatic leader... that imposed a tight, quasi-military discipline on his 500 devoted members.” Police officers interviewed for the article indicated the gang as much more vicious, violent, and better organized than ever.

*Time* and *Newsweek* published similar stories describing Chicago's Gangster Disciples (GDs). The GDs were described as the largest narcotics gang in the country with roughly 50,000 members in 35 states. *Time* published their article two years earlier than *Newsweek* although the stories provided coverage of the same phenomenon. The articles mention the gang spreading their drug operations to cities in the south and northwest, and the exalted leader, Larry Hoover, was making a comeback after running the organization for two decades from prison. “The flow of GD's back onto the streets enabled Hoover to set up two boards of directors – one inside and the other outside the prison—through which he controlled his network of governors, coordinators, and regents. These men in turn managed the gang's day-to-day operation: teenage pushers, lookouts, and mules who worked the inner-city schoolyards, housing projects and streets” (*Time* 3/19/97).

Consistent with the picture of gangs as organized groups, a number of articles described gangs as small and tightly disciplined hierarchies. For instance, *Newsweek* (1982) reports: “The Nuestra Familia demonstrates an MBA's talent for organization. It is governed by an elaborate constitution that provides for a carefully ranked hierarchy, a system of punishment and a 'retirement' plan after twenty years' service” (2/1/82). Two decades later, a *Newsweek* (3/28/05) article described

“the most dangerous gang in America,” Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), as “highly organized and disciplined...with semi-clandestine structures and vertical commands...as a result its criminal operations are all the more efficient and pervasive.” Furthermore, MS-13 were depicted in an unique international profile with an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 gang members in 33 states and more members in Central America.

Contrary to this picture of organizational capacity, several articles presented gangs as informal groups lacking clear leadership. For example, a 1988 *Newsweek* article detailed drug gangs in South Central Los Angeles as: “Leadership is usually collective, and internal organization is rudimentary...most sets are casually organized as a pickup basketball game” (3/28/88). And in 2006, a FBI agent compared the gangs of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina “to a jihadist movement: small, loosely organized and hard to track” but at the same time acknowledged that “members of new, better-organized gangs have come to New Orleans” (*Time* 5/22/06).

### ***Gang proliferation/exportation***

The prevailing image of youth gangs is that they are especially widespread in certain large cities and, in general, are associated with the urban lower class, the slum, ghetto, or barrio. There is no doubt that gangs can be found in such areas. However, over the past few years a significant change in gangs is that they are becoming more active in rural communities and small cities and towns. As early as 1985, *Time* reported that gangs are “striking out from poorer neighborhoods, they are fanning into wealthy areas and often faraway towns” (12/9/85).

Illustrative of the popular image of gangs residing in large urban areas, when discussing Los Angeles drug gangs, *Newsweek* (4/27/87) reported the following: “Fifteen minutes from the manicured lawns of Beverly Hills, in the gangland slums of South Central LA, kids as young as 15 years old roam the street in customized BMW’s and Mercedes. Some tote Uzi submachine guns and Soviet-made AK 47 assault rifles.” Complementing this stereotypical coverage, an earlier *Newsweek* (1/12/81) article stated: “Nowhere has the gang’s influence been felt more strongly than in the city’s massive housing projects...We have not taken those gangs seriously because they only plague a minority area of the city.” Similarly, *Time* (8/18/86) described the emergence of gangs in the South with a strong reference to the urban location of gangs: “Gang violence, a scourge of ghetto and barrio life in Chicago, LA and NY for decades...Jacksonville, Chattanooga, and Atlanta—mark the emergence across the American south or organized teenage gangs inspired by models in the north and west.”

Illustrating the emergence of gangs in suburban America, an article in *U.S. News and World Report* (7/16/84) reported that: “rowdy bands of youths have staked out new turf -- suburbia...Evanston's problem is far from a unique one. Street gangs -- once confined to the slums of the country's biggest cities -- are found increasingly today in smaller cities and suburbs as well. Federal researchers discovered that two thirds of the cities reporting street-gang problems had populations below 500,000. Among them: Davenport, Iowa; New Haven, Conn.; Jackson, Miss.; Portsmouth, Va., and Peoria, Ill.”

The most common reason for this migration, according to the newsweeklies, was drug trafficking operations. Drug sales were depicted as an organized activity among gang members that included exporting subgroups of their gang to cities across the United States. While previous

empirical research has shown that street gangs are engaged in interstate drug trafficking (Howell 1999; Maxson, Woods, and Klein 1996), most is limited to within-the-region movement (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). The reviewed articles made reference not only to expansion to other cities, but also to other countries. A *Newsweek* (4/27/87) article provided the following account: “The crack gangs are not limiting their operations to LA...police in Denver, Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Diego, and Portland have already reported LA gang members in their cities.... It may not be as sophisticated as the Italian Mafia, but it's organized.” Another article appearing in *Newsweek* (3/28/88) reported that “some of the more aggressive big city gangs have begun to spread the drug trade into the heartland. Police from Denver to Vancouver report that LA gangs are moving in...Atlanta, Savannah, and Alabama... Chicago gangs have appeared in Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Racine. Boston to Houston are alarmed by the emergence of Jamaican gangs known as posses...there are 30 to 40 posses with a total of about 5000 members now operating in the US...cunning, extraordinarily violent, the Jamaicans are dominating the drug trade in carefully chosen cities from Texas to Alaska. The crack trade is now transforming some of the country's toughest street gangs into ghetto-based drug trafficking organizations...some LA gangs have now established direct connections to major Columbian smugglers, thus ensuring a continuous supply of top-quality cocaine. Dangerous as it is, the situation on the west coast is just part of a much larger problem. Big-city gangs in New York, Chicago, Miami and Washington DC are breaking into the crack business as well, and some are actively spreading drugs and violence to other cities all across the country.”

More recently, *Newsweek* (3/28/05) cited a 2004 report by the National Drug Intelligence Center, stating that the gang “may be increasing its coordination with MS-13 chapters in LA, DC/Northern Virginia and NY City, possibly signaling an attempt to build a national command structure.” These depictions of gang involvement in drug distribution imply a level of organization far more sophisticated than what has been found by gang researchers and perpetuate a stereotype that bears little resemblance to reality.

### ***Discussion***

As indicated in the introduction, the objective of this research was to investigate media portrayals of gangs and gang members. We conclude that the newsweeklies paint a distorted picture of youth gangs; one that is skewed toward a stereotypical image that receives constant reinforcement in media accounts. Lack of attention to definitional concerns (e.g., failing to distinguish between prison gangs and youth gangs) is a primary contributing factor to the distortion. While the old adage “a rose is a rose...”, may be apropos to roses, it is not the case with gangs. News reporters would be well advised to be more precise in their reference to gangs, realizing that their portrayals do in fact impact the general public’s perception of the youth gang problem.

Our analysis of 34 articles appearing in the “Big Three” newsweeklies between 1980 and May 2006 leads us to the conclusion that the reporters failed to appreciate the diversity of gangs that they considered to be a monolithic phenomenon. We also found that the newsweeklies perpetuated the myth that gangs are a male-dominated problem or that when females are involved they are so as insignificant players. Recent survey research has repeatedly shown that females account for more than one-third of youth gang members who are involved in a substantial amount of violent offending. We did not find a comparable amount of attention given to female gang members; thus, reinforcing the notion that gangs are comprised mainly of males.

The articles reviewed in this study also lead to the conclusion that the newsweeklies perpetuate the popular image of gang members as racial or ethnic minorities. When race or ethnicity was ascribed to gang members, it was inevitably that of a racial or ethnic minority. Thus, the gang problem was presented as a race/ethnicity problem, downplaying the role of white gang members in the violence associated with gangs.

Another stereotype borne out by the articles examined as part of this research is: gangs continue to be portrayed as an urban problem that has spread to new areas. The proliferation of gangs is portrayed as part of a conspiracy to establish satellite sects across the country. Unfortunately, the articles fail to report research results that refute such an explanation.

Coverage of the organizational characteristics of gangs appears schizophrenic, in part because of the lack of attention to definition. While most of the articles that alluded to gang organization gave the impression that the gangs were hierarchical, with clear leaders and rules, other articles highlighted the lack of structure. Based upon research, prison gangs and some of the larger drug distribution gangs are characterized by greater levels of organizational structure. Many smaller gangs and youth gangs, however, lack this organizational capacity.

With respect to the representation of violence and gangs, the media does a considerable disservice by exaggerating this aspect of gangs. There is no doubt that gangs and gang members commit a disproportionate amount of violence. The notion that violence is an everyday occurrence and something that drives the gang experience is not substantiated in research. Much of a gang member's daily life is similar to that of others living in the same community. Violent incidents are exaggerated (see, for example Decker and van Winkle 1996) and media accounts bear little resemblance to the 'reality' of youth gangs and violence. As others have documented, the media appear more intent on contributing to a distortion of youth violence in general and gang violence in particular (e.g., McCorkle and Miethe 1998; Perrone and Chesney-Lind 1997; Thompson et al. 2000; and Zatz 1987) than it does accurately reflecting the nature and scope of the problem. Is this distortion attributable to economics (i.e., sensational headlines sell newspapers and draws audiences)? Possibly, but we believe that another contributing factor to the distortion of gangs in the media falls on the shoulders of reporters.

In the relatively recent past, one of the authors participated in a conference intended to bridge the gap between the media and academics. Researchers presented empirical findings and reporters provided input on how such research could be better disseminated to journalists. At face value, this conference appeared to fertilize cross-disciplinary discussion. However, while walking back to the hotel from the conference site, one of the authors overheard three of the attending journalists debunking the day's sessions. The comments (e.g., "Could you believe that ...?"; "I felt like I was back in college.") suggested that there would be little, if any, change in their coverage of the crime beat. Another of the conference presenters asked why crime and crime news were not reported in the same manner as science, business/economics, and the environment. The response was that crime is a local problem, to which my colleague commented, burglary is fairly universal as is most crime. The sense was that crime was simply unimportant from a larger societal perspective and should be treated as a local problem.

Our attempt to examine media portrayal of gangs confirmed our suspicions. The articles

included in this study tended to reinforce stereotypical depictions of gangs and failed to incorporate research-based information. We encourage journalists to strive to provide a more realistic assessment of an on-going social problem. We also encourage the readership of the popular press to demand greater accountability on the part of the media.

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