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MEXICAN AMERICAN YOUTH AND ADULT PRISON GANGS IN A CHANGING HEROIN MARKET

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Abstract

This article focuses on the interaction between the larger community's drug markets and youth and adult prison gangs, and the process that leads to specific adverse consequences both to the youth gangs as organizations, and to individual members. Described is the emergence of a restructured heroin market dominated by an adult prison gang. A major consequence of this was the increasing use of heroin among Mexican American gang members and their transformation from autonomous youth gangs to extensions of the adult prison gangs or their demise. Data was collected from 160 members of 26 Mexican American youth gangs and key informants in San Antonio. Findings focus on organizational rules, drug market transformations, consequences on members, and the impact of heroin on the gang's organization. Discussed is how the dominance of prison gangs is related to the increased incarceration and recidivism rates of Mexican Americans and declining economic opportunities for urban minorities.

INTRODUCTION

The participation in the drug market by youth street gangs is best understood as part of a constellation of economic and social activities that comprise the informal economy of urban minority communities (Fagan, 1996; Jackson, 1991). The increasing presence of minorities in the drug market in this country during the last 30 years (1970–2000) has coincided with economic restructuring (Wilson, 1975; Wilson, 1990). These economic changes exacerbated the maldistribution of wealth and have produced greater inequality and, as a by-product, increased poverty, joblessness, and welfare dependency in urban minority neighborhoods. As a result, low-income immigrants and minorities including youth gangs in interaction with adults have taken advantage of the economic opportunities in different sectors of the informal economies.

Previous studies offer insights into the participation of minority youth and gangs in the illegal drug market, especially during the cocaine and crack epidemic in New York during the 1980s and 1990s (Curtis, 2003; Hamid, 1990; Williams, 1989). Studies specifically on gangs have focused on their participation in street-level heroin and other drug distribution markets (Bullington, 1977; Hagedorn, 1998; Moore, 1978; Sanders, 1994). Some researchers report that gangs are well organized drug trade enterprises and are responsible for the majority of the drug distribution business in these markets (Padilla, 1992; Skolnick, Correll, Navarro, & Rabb, 1990; Taylor, 1990). Other researchers have found that gangs are

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not the major perpetrators of illegal drug trade and that the connection between street gangs and drug sales and related problems is overstated (Fagan, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998; Maxson, 1995). However, as Venkatesh (1997, p. 83) states there is still a gap in the “attention to the ways in which street gangs interact with other groups (*adults*) and institutions in its neighborhood.”

This article focuses on the interaction between the larger community’s drug markets and youth and adult prison gangs and the process that leads to specific adverse consequences, both to the youth gangs as organizations and to individual members. The interest here is in the patterns of change and continuity of gangs and community over time. This article describes heroin use and dealing among Mexican Americans within the context of San Antonio, Texas. Discussed are the gang’s initial prohibition of heroin use and its enforcement through a “no heroin rule.” As well, we discuss the emergence of a restructured San Antonio heroin market dominated by an adult prison gang. Furthermore, we examine the effects of this changing heroin market controlled by the prison gang on gang member’s heroin use and other personal consequences. Lastly, the paper explores how the gang’s organizational rise and fall is influenced within the context of this changing heroin market.

HEROIN USE, SELLING, AND DEALING IN THE BARRIO

The Mexican American drug using population has been characterized in the literature as having a clear preference for heroin and other opiates and nearly universal use of intravenous injection as the route of administration (Bullington, 1977; Casavantes, 1976; Desmond & Maddux, 1984; Moore, 1978; National Institute of Justice, 1996). As a result of this pattern of drug use within this population, a distinct heroin subculture developed over the last 50 years in southwestern cities and towns among Mexican American users or “tecatos.” The term tecato tends to denote a chronic or career heroin user with a criminal orientation and repeated involvement with the criminal justice system (Quintero & Estrada, 2000; Ramos, 1995; Valdez, Kaplan, & Cepeda, 2000). As a result, tecatos have developed a distinct street identity that revolves around a “pachuco” lifestyle characterized by heroin use, criminality, incarceration, unique style of dress and tattoos, and social networks. They have traditionally been stigmatized and socially isolated from the larger Mexican American and Anglo community. Despite this lifestyle, they tend to remain integrated into family and neighborhood networks more so than heroin users from other groups (i.e., Puerto Ricans, Blacks and especially Whites). For these and other reasons, investigators have described Mexican American heroin users as “clannish” (Casavantes, 1976) even within their own neighborhoods and in the prison system.

Mexican Americans have traditionally dominated the opium, morphine, and heroin trade since before World War II (Bullington, 1977; Desmond & Maddux, 1984). This early period corresponds with increased numbers of Mexicans immigrating to the United States. Within this market, Mexican Americans had an advantage in the drug trafficking business over others in that they shared a common language and ethnic background with drug wholesalers in Mexico’s border regions and interior.

The proximity of Mexico, a major source of heroin in the United States, has made heroin more accessible to users in South Texas than to other regions of the U.S. In 1988, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) pursuant to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act designated the southwest border of the U.S. as a high intensity drug trafficking area (HIDTA). These areas are identified as having the most critical drug trafficking problems that adversely impact the United States (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2003; United States Government Printing Office, 2001). For instance, South Texas, which shares a 2,000-mile

border with Mexico that is one to two counties deep, is identified as a primary staging area for large-scale binational narcotic trafficking operations.

Although not conclusive, sources tend to agree that exclusive networks of multigenerational family members and friends carry out heroin distribution activities in Mexican American communities (Moore, 1978; Valdez & Mata, 1999). Some of these networks are small and their operations limited to specific southwestern cities, whereas others are larger, national drug networks. Even though South Texas is primarily a staging area for large-scale shipments of narcotics to the north; heroin, cocaine, marijuana and prescription drugs “spill over” and flood the local market (Valdez, Cepeda, Kaplan, & Yin, 1998). As a result, Mexican American heroin users in these southwestern communities have little difficulty making purchases from neighborhood-based dealers, at local bars, private residences, on the streets or more recently by home delivery services.

There have been few studies on Mexican American drug use and selling/dealing especially among youth gang members (Bullington, 1977; Sanders, 1994; Valdez & Sifaneck, 2004). The sparse existing literature suggests that most Mexican American street gangs are involved in drug markets as low-level sellers, with only a minority engaged in profitable, mid-level drug enterprises. Moore’s (Moore, 1978) study discusses the participation of adult gangs within the drug market of East Los Angeles. Moore states, “drug dealers did employ members... in a hierarchy that included non-addicted dealers, addicted dealers (who in turn would supply addict-pushers who sold heroin for use rather than profit), and finally the consumer addict” (1978, p. 85). Her findings suggested that it was usually individual older gang members who used other gang members to market the drugs to the street consumer.

In a previous article that focused on the role Mexican American gangs and members have in the drug market, a fourfold typology emerged based on two dimensions: (1) the gang’s organizational structure defined by involvement in drug dealing and (2) the individual gang member’s role in using, selling, and dealing drugs (Valdez & Sifaneck, 2004). The typology encompasses a wide range of connections and intersections between gangs, their individual members, and the selling of illegal drugs within the wider distribution system. A major finding of this study was that most gang members are user/sellers and are not profit-oriented dealers. It found that there were seven highly entrepreneurial and organized criminal gangs among the 26 gangs that are the subject of this research. It also suggests that adult prison gangs and criminal family members may play important roles in member’s drug dealing activities. This study builds upon this earlier work by focusing on the role of adult prison gangs and the larger drug markets on the transformation of Mexican American youth gangs in San Antonio.

METHODS

This research evolved from a study of gang violence among Mexican American gangs in South Texas sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on drug Abuse (NIDA). The focus of the study was to identify and distinguish the relationship between gang violence and drug use among male gangs. The term “youth gang” is used in this study to refer to groups of adolescents who engage in collective acts of delinquency and violence and are perceived by others and themselves as a distinct group. Moreover, the group has a structured hierarchy with rituals and symbols (colors, signs, etc.) and is associated with a territory.¹

¹In the literature there are very different definitions of what constitutes an adolescent gang (Klein, 1971; Miller, 1975; Moore, 1978; Yablonsky, 1962) often based on the researcher’s relationship to the gang and source of information. The definition used in this study is based on our experiences in working with gangs in San Antonio.

The study used multiple methods, including ethnographic field observations, focus groups, and life history/intensive interviews with 160 male gang members (Yin, Valdez, Mata, & Kaplan, 1996). The study was delimited to two areas of the city's Mexican American population encompassing centers of commerce and residency for the group. The area also has the highest concentration of delinquent behavior and Mexican American gang activity as well as underclass characteristics (Kasarda, 1985). This delimitation was based on ecological data such as the U.S. Census, criminal justice data, public housing statistics, and previously published governmental reports and studies.

After identifying two study areas, two indigenous field-workers began the social mapping of these communities, using systematic field observations and recording extensive field notes. Using Wiebel's (1993) indigenous outreach model, field-workers were selected based on their knowledge and familiarity with the targeted community and their ability to provide entrée to groups of Mexican American juvenile gang members. The social mapping stage of the study lasted approximately six months, although fieldwork and collection of field notes was a continuous process lasting a total of four years. Social mapping assisted in the identification of gangs and where the target groups congregate, such as public parks, public housing spaces, playgrounds, recreational centers, downtown areas, neighborhood businesses, and specific neighborhoods. In conducting this initial fieldwork, fieldworkers were able to establish an ethnographic presence (Sifaneck & Neaigus, 2001) and maintain a high visibility within the targeted community to help legitimize the project in the community. After this was accomplished, the field-workers began to make contacts with the gang members, gain their trust, and obtain access to their social networks. The primary goals of the field-workers were to establish rapport with the gang members, maintain nonjudgmental attitudes and promote candid and accurate reporting by respondents during data collection and the interview process. Respondents were assured that information disclosed would be held in the strictest confidentiality as protected by NIH federal guidelines. Much of the data collected on the gang's drug selling activities and that of the adult prison gangs was usually triangulated to insure truthfulness and assure accuracy. This was particularly the case in descriptions of sensational events such as gunfights or murders that often had to be pieced together from various persons.

After gaining access, rapport, and trust, field-workers began to collect observational data based on gang hangouts mentioned previously. Results of this fieldwork were recorded in daily field notes that were shared and discussed with the research team. All efforts were made not to use information from school officials or police agencies in order to not associate the project with these authorities. Attention was focused on the primacy of developing and maintaining networks and a research presence in these communities and among the gangs in these areas.

The fieldwork resulted in identifying all 26 active juvenile gangs and their respective rosters in this area whose cumulative membership totaled 404 persons. The validity and accuracy of gang rosters were checked using at least three of four collateral sources: "gatekeepers," gang member contacts, key respondents, and field-workers' observations. Gatekeepers are those who control access to information, other individuals, and places (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Field-workers were able to acquire information for initially classifying membership (leader, core, peripherals), gang type, and to delineate the gang's territory (neighborhood). Using this information, a stratified sample was designed that generated the 160 gang members interviewed for this study (See Yin et al., 1996 for a detailed description of this sampling procedure.) Approximately 10 gang members originally selected refused to be interviewed, giving us a refusal rate that is not any more different from those of more conventional surveys. A monetary incentive of \$40 was provided to the gang member for participating in the interview. In order to protect the identities of the study participants,

actual names of the gangs and gang members were known only to the field-workers and the project administrator. Any reference to individual members or organizations was based on pseudonyms or an identification number assigned by the administrator. Fictitious names were given to all geographic and other physical locations. Formal consent forms were required of all the participants as well.

For the purpose of this paper emphasis will be on drug selling and drug use information elicited from the 160 respondents at various points during the life history/intensive interview, field notes, and informal interviews. Focus group data on drug markets was limited given they were conducted during the initial months of the study when drug markets were not a primary focus. The cross-sectional interview consisted of both closed- and open-ended responses and took approximately two hours to administer. Embedded in the formal interview were scenario questions on the respondents' gangs' organizational structure and two major illegal activities (Page, 1990). The latter scenario included specifics on the activity such as the types of drugs sold, individual in charge, the subject's participation and the distribution of profits. Specifically, an open-ended question was asked regarding whether the gang's illegal activities were connected in any way with adults or "veteranos" outside the gang. If so, they were asked to probe for ages, activity, frequency, relatives, etc. From this data, the role of the prison gangs in the drug market emerged. A closed-ended question elicited data on the gangs' frequency of dealing during the last year as well. Individual level data was also collected by asking respondents their frequency of drug selling during the last year as well as the characteristics of their customers.

The field-workers conducted less formal on-the-spot ethnographic interviews focused on specific topics that emerged throughout the four years of the study. The emergence of the heroin market was one such theme that we began to focus on particularly toward the latter part of the research. These field interviews were conducted with study respondents and others in the community knowledgeable about gangs and the drug market such as social service agency representatives, public housing residents, recreational workers, and small store owners. Field interviews were also conducted with five veteran prison gang members who were long-time acquaintances of one of the staff members. These key informants provided valuable information on the drug market. Field notes based on these interviews were taken by the field-workers. There were also weekly debriefing sessions between the principal investigator and field-workers where information on the drug markets were discussed. For instance, if there had been a murder in the community the session might focus on who were the individuals involved, gang involvement, and if it was drug related. The field note and life history/intensive interview data were combined into an electronic qualitative database. The data was then analyzed and contextualized for themes and commonalities.

Based on these data, four classifications of Mexican American gangs were constructed from the analysis (Valdez, 2003). The classifications of the 26 gangs include criminal adult-dependent gangs (4), criminal nonadult dependent gangs (5), barrio-territorial gangs (12), and transitional gangs (5). The gangs were classified by five dimensions: illegal activities, gang organization, drug-use patterns, adult influences, and violent behavior. This analysis produced four polythetic classes of gangs that share an overall similarity around these different dimensions (Bailey, 1994). However, these are not absolute categories and demonstrate fluidity in that some gangs may change from one type to another over time.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Formal respondents consisted of 160 male gang members ranging in age from 14 to 25 years with a mean age of 19. Approximately 43% of the respondents reported living in single head of households with a large proportion living with mothers (39%). Only 21% were living in

households where both parents were present. The remaining 37% were currently living by themselves, friends, or other relatives including grandparents, wives, uncles, and aunts. Interestingly, 31% of the subjects reported having children. Only 26% reported being currently enrolled in middle or high school. Sixty eight percent reported having lived or currently living in public housing. Almost the entire sample of gang members had used marijuana and cocaine in their lifetime. Approximately three fourths reported lifetime use of benzodiazepines (e.g., rohypnol). Close to half reported using speedballs, psychedelics, and heroin. Current substance (last 30 days) use patterns indicated 75% of these respondents were using marijuana, and half reported using cocaine. A fourth currently used speedballs, benzodiazepines, and heroin. Among the current heroin users, 58% were noninjectors (i.e., sniffing/snorting) and 42% injectors.

Evidence of increasing heroin use was observed in a two-year follow-up pilot study on this population where self reported data revealed 43% of the noninjectors had transitioned to injecting (Valdez, Mata, Codina, Kubicek, & Tovar, 2001). Yet another follow-up study conducted eight years after the original sample was interviewed demonstrated a pattern of increased heroin use. In conducting this follow-up study, a random sample of 80 original gang members was relocated and administered a short questionnaire. Of this sample, approximately half reported using heroin during this interim period. Further evidence of this increasing heroin use is based on the constant contact with this population through several other studies conducted by this research team in this community. One of these was a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study that focused on the females associated (i.e., girlfriends, siblings, relatives, etc.) with the original male gangs.

FINDINGS

GANG'S PROHIBITION AGAINST HEROIN USE

Mexican American street gang members in this study voice ambivalent attitudes towards tecatos. Although Chicano adult heroin users have been an integral part of the criminal scene in the barrios, they are marginally accepted by other participants such as gang members, juvenile delinquents, car thieves, drug sellers and dealers, "coke heads," and alcoholics. Tecatos have a reputation even among these networks as being untrustworthy and unreliable. Once a heroin user becomes addicted, this person needs to generate approximately \$40 to \$100 a day to avoid experiencing withdrawal distress. Acquiring the drug becomes the driving force of their existence. As a result, addicts spend most of their time in criminal or quasi-criminal activities related to generating resources to purchase drugs. This includes shoplifting; committing burglaries; fencing stolen merchandise; and scamming friends, neighbors, and relatives for money. Additionally, addicts spend much of their time in the complex process of locating and obtaining their drugs from numerous sources in the communities. This eventually leads to arrests and sporadic periods of incarceration for these individuals.

However, young gang members are reluctant to completely reject tecatos because many are often immediate and extended family members, neighbors, and friends. Therefore, many gang members know firsthand how an addict's behavior negatively impacts the lives of family and friends. Many have personally experienced how their heroin dependent fathers, older brothers, or, in some cases, mothers discard their family obligations, caring about little but feeding their addiction (Valdez et al., 2000). One gang member stated, "You can't trust them (addicts), they'll steal from their own mothers."

As a result of such experiences, most gangs actively discourage the use of heroin through a "no heroin" rule that prohibits the use of heroin among its members. Nearly 70% of the respondents report that their gang had such a rule as part of the informal by laws. The

sanctions for violating the rule varied from a verbal warning to a severe beating. One gang member explains the no heroin rule in his gang:

The rules were just something everybody knew. It was just understood that heroin was not allowed. If a person was known to have done heroin and the gang leadership found out about it then a violation would be given to the gang member who was accused of doing heroin. The punishment depended on how bad the violation was.

It is clear from our field research that sanctions vary across the different types of gangs and depended on the status of the gang member within the organization.

The Chicano Dudes, a criminal nondependent gang, is one of the gangs in the study who had a strict no heroin rule. Members of this gang remarked that they did not want to be known as “a bunch of spray heads and tecatos.” This gang was one of the largest in the city at the start of this study with a membership of approximately 150 persons. The gang was organized into five different sets (cliques or subgroups) found throughout the Mexican American community. This was especially the case in outlying areas of the barrios where many families were being relocated as result of the closing of several housing projects. The gang’s principal set was located in one of the housing projects that remained open.

In the beginning of our study, the Chicano Dudes held weekly meetings. Among other business, the leadership would give out violations and sanctions to those members who allegedly used heroin. First time violators would just get a verbal warning. If the heroin use persisted, the leadership would order that the member be given a “calentada” (beating) by three to six members of the gang.

However, not all the gangs had a no heroin rule nor was the rule always enforced among those that had one. For instance, the Nine-Ball Crew, an adult dependent criminal gang, did not enforce such a rule because many of its members, including the leader, were selling heroin. Thus it was not in the gang’s interest to have this kind of restriction on their membership. In some cases, senior members of some gangs (popularly identified as the older gangsters, or “OGs”) used heroin despite the gang’s no heroin rule. As one member stated, “They (OGs) don’t listen to no one anyway.” Their OG status seemed to give them special privilege. However, this exception to the rule encouraged other gang members to use heroin as they realized that they might not be given the sanctions associated with this violation.

PRISON GANGS AND THE DRUG MARKET TRANSITIONS

The drug market in San Antonio’s Mexican American community has been a highly diversified marketplace with various actors operating at different levels within this market. Exclusive networks of multigenerational family and friends carry out these drug activities. Some of these networks are small, and their operations limited to San Antonio. Others are larger, organized drug networks with connections in Mexico and other cities throughout the United States. Although a hierarchical structure exists in this drug market, there has always been space for individual entrepreneurs to operate. Mexican American drug users in San Antonio looking to buy the more popular drugs (e.g., marijuana, cocaine, and heroin) do not have any difficulty locating a seller or dealer in the immediate community. This may be less so for Black or White drug users. Additionally, a robust market exists for prescription drugs that enter the United States through the loopholes in the U.S./Mexico laws. This results in an abundant influx of such drugs as tranquilizers, painkillers, diet pills, and other drugs used recreationally by Mexican Americans (Valdez et al., 1998).

The South Texas drug market has four organizational levels. These include large-scale distribution enterprises with links to well-known Mexican suppliers, intermediate dealers who buy large quantities, smaller dealers, and user/sellers (Valdez & Sifaneck, 2004). The user/sellers sell small affordable quantities to barrio recreational drug users and addicts. Gang members in this study deal drugs at all levels except at the large-scale level that is restricted for older, well-established dealers with Mexican connections. Most gang members are found at the user/seller level and only sell drugs to reduce the costs associated with their own drug use. For the most part, this activity consists of selling small quantities of marijuana and cocaine to friends and acquaintances. This is usually very loosely organized with individuals engaged in freelance rather than organized drug entities. The barrio-territorial and transitional gangs tended to fall into this category, while the other gang types were more likely to function as intermediate or small dealers. The relationship, however, between gang membership, gang organization, drug use, and drug distribution is constructed along a complex dimension in this community (Valdez & Sifaneck, 2004).

The city's heroin market radically changed when a Mexican American prison gang, Pura Vida, entered into this marketplace in the early 1980s. Pura Vida was one of three prison gangs with a presence in San Antonio's criminal scene. At the time of the study, the other two prison gangs operated in areas outside the territories where the gangs and gang members for this study were recruited.² The 1990s experienced a dramatic increase in incarceration and recidivism rates in Texas and the United States, largely as a result of federal and state drug laws passed during the last three decades (Gray, 1998). Thus, the American prison population increased to approximately two million persons during the 1990s. Young Hispanics and Blacks disproportionately comprised the majority of this incarcerated population in the U.S. (Harrison & Beck, 2003). Eventually, this incarcerated population returned to communities that offered little economic opportunity, particularly for ex-felons.

Pura Vida was formed by Mexican American inmates from San Antonio in penal institutions in the Texas Department of Corrections in 1984 allegedly to protect themselves from White supremacists and Black nationalists groups. In 1992 Pura Vida was reported to have approximately 700 members in the Texas prison system; this number increased to 1,425 in 1998 (Cornyn, 1999). This group rapidly became the largest gang in the Texas prison system and was known for their wide range of criminal activity in the prisons including extortion, drug sales, and murder.

According to interviews with ex-felons, when members of Pura Vida began to be released (paroled) from penal institutions, they organized themselves into a criminal network outside the prison. Under the leadership of members still inside the system, Pura Vida began to engage in drug dealing, extortion, fencing stolen property, and other illegal activities throughout South Texas. Pura Vida's presence was most visible on the west side of San Antonio, home for many of the parolees before being incarcerated. Neighborhoods in this area are characterized as having the highest concentration of low-income persons of Mexican origin in the city. It was within this community, particularly in the city housing projects, that they established their presence in the drug marketplace.

During the course of this study (1995–1999), Pura Vida gradually gained control of a large portion of the heroin and cocaine market in large areas of the west and south sides. The control of the heroin market has been accomplished through a highly regimented vertical organization using ex-felons recruited in the prisons and connections in Mexico. The

²One of these gangs was initiated by Mexican American prisoners from El Paso and the other by inmates from the Rio Grande Valley and other parts of South Texas. At the time of the study, although there was some competition among the gangs, neither gang posed a threat to the control that Pura Vida on the west or south side of San Antonio.

organizational structure is along paramilitary lines with a president, vice president, general, captains, lieutenants, sergeants, and soldiers. They communicate to outside members through personal visits from relatives who relay directives, written material, and, in some cases, cryptic phone calls.

Independent drug dealers are allowed to sell in these geographic areas, but they are assessed a 10% surcharge, known as *el diez por ciento*, on all drug sales by the gang. Pura Vida members enforce the surcharge through intimidation, physical threats, violence, and murder. In one highly publicized incident, Pura Vida soldiers killed an independent heroin dealer who had refused to pay his diez por ciento. What made this incident so shocking was that the dealer's teenage daughter, boyfriend, and friends who were not involved in the drug market were also murdered. Weeks later the perpetrators of these killings were found, mysteriously murdered, their bodies dumped on the outskirts of the city.³

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHANGING HEROIN MARKET ON YOUTH GANGS AND MEMBERS

INCREASED USE OF HEROIN

Part of Pura Vida's success in this market was a result of its well established heroin connections in Mexico, organizational structure, and members' loyalty and commitment. Once they acquired these characteristics, they began to market the drug, just like any retailer or wholesaler. Pura Vida consciously targeted heroin sales to two vulnerable populations: delinquent nongang youths and gang members. They did this by making the drug more accessible, lowering the prices, offering higher purity levels and using gang members and peers as sellers. One young heroin user commenting on the accessibility of heroin said, "You can get it anywhere in the neighborhood, from all kinds of people. Even young kids can get it for you." One gang member reported how easy it was to score a \$10.00 paper to snort a few lines of heroin to party or when they were just "kicking back." Increased purity allowed users to ingest the drug in ways other than through injecting, a practice that was still frowned upon by most gang leaders and members. As a result, snorting heroin (or "sniffing") slowly became an acceptable alternative among many gang members, particularly as its availability increased within this population.

While heroin use increased, for many members it still retained the ambiguous status of the past. In contrast, the use of marijuana and cocaine was highly normalized among gang members in this study. Many smoked "weed" (marijuana) continuously throughout the day. Marijuana use is highly associated with gangs and other delinquent juveniles in many low-income minority neighborhoods. One field-worker notes, "These guys smoke marijuana while walking to school, cruising, and even during pick-up basketball games at neighborhood playgrounds. It's just common behavior." Intranasal use of powdered cocaine is also an acceptable part of the gang member's lifestyle. The use of cocaine is usually reserved for parties and special occasions, such as a concert or sporting event. Cocaine is also used when a gang member has acquired some unexpected cash (usually through some illegal activity) and decides to share his good fortune with his "homeboys" (a vernacular term for close friend).

About a quarter of the gang members interviewed report using heroin in the last 30 days. Approximately 42% of these were injectors, and the rest reported intranasal use (sniffing or snorting). As mentioned previously, heroin was a highly stigmatized drug that was

³This information was gathered initially from fieldwork and later confirmed by police reports and articles that appeared in the *San Antonio Express-News* during this period.

associated with being a tecato when the study began. In a focus group for the noninjecting project, one participant described tecatos as “dirty, sick, and always scratching themselves.” Persons who were heroin addicts were chastised by gang members even though tecatos were part of the street scene in these neighborhoods. In fact, many gang members had older adult relatives who were heroin addicts. These attitudes about heroin users changed as gang members began to increase their noninjecting use of heroin. This was done either by snorting it or “shabanging,” a method in which a solution of heroin and water is prepared and sprayed into the nasal passages with either a syringe or an eyedropper.

CO-OPTATION AND RECRUITMENT OF GANG MEMBERS BY ADULT PRISON GANGS

Another consequence of the dominance of the heroin market by Pura Vida in San Antonio is the practice of recruitment and co-optation of members of the youth gangs. Pura Vida has recruited gang members either as independent sellers or as more formal associates of the gang. The association may range from a “probationary” or “apprentice” status to a full-fledged member. Many delinquent barrio youths have been eager to join the Pura Vida, given the prison veteran’s warrior-like status within the street culture of San Antonio’s barrios. The “pinto” (prison veteran) is seen by many as having a highly disciplined code of conduct and a philosophy of life attuned to the values of many street-oriented young men. In addition, many of these delinquent youths assume that by joining Pura Vida, they would have access to more lucrative illegal enterprises and increased levels of protection from other street rivals.

Most young gang members were initially recruited into Pura Vida when they were sent to Texas state correctional facilities. Upon entering the system with a street reputation as “un vato firme” (a stand-up and trust worthy person) they would likely be approached by them to join. Several gang members comment that, “It’s hard to not join and keep your allegiance to your street gang when you’re locked up.” Those who have tried to resist have had to suffer some serious consequences. An example of this is what happened to a member of the Chicano Dudes, a gang that for many years has tried to maintain independence from the prison gangs. Sammy, one of the secondary leaders of the Chicano Dudes, was sent to an adult correctional unit outside of San Antonio that was controlled by the prison gang. Sammy continued to “sport the gang’s colors” in prison, even after being warned repeatedly by Pura Vida not to do so. The wearing of the gang’s colors symbolized his continuing alliance to his street gang. As result of his refusal to yield, Sammy was severely beaten by the prison gang. One gang member said, “They were just sending a message to the Chicano Dudes.”

Because of this type of intimidation and violence, most gang members in state prisons agree to join or at least provide “esquina” (loyalty) to Pura Vida or one of the other Chicano gangs that control that facility. In the prison, they develop a close solidarity with the organization and participate in the group’s illegal activities. They are also tutored on Pura Vida philosophy, codes of conduct, and principles of the organizations. Upon release from prison they become the “soldados” (foot soldiers) of Pura Vida and usually do not return to their street gang.

Another common mechanism of recruitment is kinship. Gang members who are recruited into Pura Vida often have a close relative – a brother, father, uncle, or cousin – already in the gang. Such persons may have been active in Pura Vida activities outside of prison, but because of age or inexperience, have not been admitted. However, if a relative (who is a member of prison gang) were to put his word and reputation on the line for this prospective

gang member, he will be admitted. Gang members recruited in this way often prove to be extremely loyal.

The case of Jaime, the leader of the Nine-Ball Crew, illustrates the influence of family on the recruitment of gang members. Jaime's stepfather, a high-level member of Pura Vida, controlled the drug trafficking for the prison gang in the neighborhood in which the gang was located. Jaime mentioned in interviews the respect he had for his stepfather and the position he had in Pura Vida and his ambition of eventually becoming a member. By the end of the research project, Jaime, as well as many other gang members, had been recruited by Pura Vida mostly through familial ties, such as cousins, uncles, and brothers.

Another way a youth gang member may become an associate of Pura Vida is by being identified as someone who is "moving" (selling) large amounts of drugs in the neighborhood. Word spreads that a gang member has the reputation or potential to be a "good hustler" or a "good earner." This gang member will be approached by Pura Vida and told that he must start to pay the 10% fee for dealing in their territory or suffer the consequences. Some gang members, however, are given the option of selling directly for Pura Vida. This means they do not have to pay the diez por ciento and will be afforded the physical protection of the gang. This does not make them a full-fledged gang member, but it does provide an associate status.

Pura Vida also recruits associates into their organization by "fronting" drugs to potential earners. Fronting is a technique that is commonly used by drug dealers. It is somewhat similar to giving credit to someone. Pura Vida will front drugs to a gang member and in turn is obligated to pay his debt after the drugs are sold. If the gang member does not pay his full debt in the manner agreed upon, then he may be forced to continue to sell for Pura Vida even after his debt is paid. Many times just the intimidation that Pura Vida wields in the neighborhood obligates individuals to sell for them. The positive aspect of fronting for the gang member is that he now has the protection of the prison gang from rival youth gangs and other adult criminals in the same area.

PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES FOR GANG MEMBERS

As described in the interviews and focus groups, heroin is a drug that allows users to feel relaxed, particularly as compared to cocaine that makes them feel "too wired." As noted, many gang members often began to use heroin intranasally during the course of the study. Many mentioned that this route was preferred over injecting because of a belief that it would allow them to control their use and avoid addiction. As the follow-up data mentioned earlier indicated, transitioning to injecting had adverse consequences for these gang members. Many of those that began to inject became dependent (addicted), a status that led to personal problems and impaired functioning with respect to obligations as gang members.

Once they transition to drug injecting these young adults engage in other exceptionally high-risk health behaviors. Our data indicates that over half of those who inject have shared a needle with another user and over 80% of them have shared a cooker, filter, or rinse water with another user. These behaviors make these individuals much more susceptible to infection with HIV, hepatitis B and C viruses, and other blood-borne pathogens.

Gang members that are addicted begin to engage in compulsive drug-seeking behavior that is irresponsible and indifferent to their responsibility as gang members. Moreover, they become unable to sustain nonheroin related personal relationships. They begin to engage in crimes that are geared towards getting resources to buy drugs, such as burglary, shoplifting, low-level drug selling (for one's own profit), and other less "gang related" crimes. This behavior invariably leads to conflicts with the gang's leadership who often continue to

enforce the no heroin rule. This rule becomes increasingly more difficult to enforce because large numbers of the members are using heroin. In some gangs, the leadership itself was using heroin. In these circumstances, the leadership has no moral authority to enforce the no heroin rule.

Some gangs experience such critical numbers of members drifting away to the heroin tecato subculture that the gang's viability was threatened. The gang that best illustrates this transformation is the Chicano Dudes. Follow-up data and qualitative fieldwork estimated that approximately thirty of the hard-core members became addicted to heroin during the course of the study. This gang initially had a very strict no heroin rule; however, as the leadership and OGs began using and selling large quantities of heroin, the rule was no longer enforced. Heroin use has become so prevalent among this gang that it has acquired a reputation among other gangs as a "bunch of tecatos" and has nearly disintegrated.

Another major consequence of heroin use among members is the disproportionate incarceration rate compared to nonusers. Many heroin users are arrested and incarcerated for two primary reasons. One is directly associated with the selling and dealing of heroin. A gang member who sells heroin eventually will get "snitched on" by a disgruntled customer, a neighbor, or even a fellow heroin dealer who is trying to rid himself of competition. One of these persons will turn his name over to law enforcement, an action that often ends in his arrest. The other reason for arrest and incarceration is due to the high volume of burglaries, robberies, and car thefts they commit. While incarceration has a negative effect on the individual, it has an even more detrimental impact on the organization of the gang as many of its members and leaders are removed from the community.

Little information is available on the drug use patterns of Pura Vida members, but there is a general impression that these members are using marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. When asked about their drug use, one informant responded:

They use the same as the street gangs members, only difference is that they have a little more control. They're not going to be driving around with jale (drugs) on them. These guys will get messed up on the weekend.

SPECIFIC EFFECTS OF HEROIN ON THE GANG'S ORGANIZATION

Those most influenced by the changing heroin market are independent nonadult controlled gangs that sell heroin and cocaine in areas that correspond to their territory. Most of the drug selling and dealing that occurs is carried out as a gang enterprise with profits distributed to the gang as an organization. One of these, the Nine-Ball Crew, located in one of the major housing projects in San Antonio, is distinct from other adult gangs in its direct familial ties to Pura Vida through adult relatives of the gang's leadership. When the prison gang began its solidification of the heroin trade, the Nine-Ball Crew also expanded its drug trade in its own territory. The gang found itself in direct competition with Pura Vida's drug trade. One would surmise that this would lead to a serious conflict between these two entities; however, this was minimized because the leader's stepfather was one of the heads in the prison gang.

This gang is now one of the major allies of the prison gang and is used by them against other youth gangs who refuse to cooperate with them. For example, the leader of the Chicano Dudes, one of the largest gangs in the area, was shot by a Nine-Ball Crew member for refusing to pay Pura Vida a percentage of his profit. This assassination attempt (hit) was a tactic by the Pura Vida to solidify their control of the heroin trade within a specific area.

Another gang eventually co-opted by the prison gang was Varrio La Paloma (VLP), an older, established gang, and one of the few whose former members include parents and relatives. This is a nonadult dependent criminal enterprise gang. The distribution and dealing

of drugs was largely controlled by the leader of the gang and his close gang associates. The associates were older, hard-core members including two of his brothers. These individuals had connections to wholesale drug distributors that were associated with independent adult criminals with ties to Mexico. The actual drug dealing was conducted by other gang members who were fronted the drugs by the gang's leadership. The majority of the profits were turned over to the heads that pass them on to the leader of the VLP.

Pura Vida began to demand the diez por ciento from gang members selling heroin in what they determined was their territory. A compromise was reached by Pura Vida and the gang's leadership after the former promised protection and a consistent supply of heroin. In the settlement, the VLP would be allowed to continue to sell cocaine and marijuana without any disruption or surcharge, but they would pay the diez por ciento on heroin. There were several members who refused and were consequently beaten or murdered by prison gang members. In one instance, a gang member, "Shorty," refused to deal for them or pay the surcharge. As a result, the "green light" was given to prison gang members to authorize his murder. Our source described the incident:

Three men were sent to kill Shorty, but when the hit men met him they were shot and killed by him. Shorty was wounded during the gunfight. He was hit once in the thigh, once in the lower back, and once in the lower leg.

Shortly after the gunfight, while recovering from his wounds, he stated, "I work hard selling drugs, and I'm not going to share my profit with no one." One month later, another attempt was made on his life. His brother and uncle were killed, but Shorty survived.

There were a couple of gangs that successfully stood up to Pura Vida and maintained their independence. One of these was the Chicano Dudes, whom the prison gang has over the years attempted to control. The leader of the gang, Mark Sanchez, resisted through his own violent behavior and the loyalty of several hardcore members who refused to be intimidated. Only recently did this independence begin to waiver after Sanchez was seriously wounded in an aborted attempt on his life by a rival gang associated with Pura Vida. The ability and willingness of the Chicano Dudes to stand up to the adult prison gang financially benefited those members who were involved in the gang's drug dealing operations. In the case of this gang, it ceased operating as a youth gang and focused almost entirely on its drug business. Nongang drug business activity was further depleted through many of the member's heroin use and addiction.

Several gangs experienced a complete dissemination as result of heroin addiction. A critical number of the leaders and members become either heavy users or addicts. Many of these then became unable to fulfill their obligations to the gang. Unable to provide protection to their members or defend their territories from encroachment by other gangs, they become easy prey for rival gangs. Other factors associated with the complete transformation of these gangs can be attributed to intimidation and coercion by the prison gangs.

After successfully taking over a neighborhood, Pura Vida actually discourages gang activities that would draw the attention of law enforcement to the neighborhood. The notes from one of our field-workers illustrates:

On one occasion while doing fieldwork in the Comanche Homes at the Kauffman Center, I witnessed a beating that was administered by the Pura Vida. Three guys in their early twenties walked straight up to this young male, about 17 years old, and just started kicking him and hitting him with their fists. The young man did not offer much resistance. I took a step forward to intervene when immediately I was held back by one of the community workers who told me that it was a "camalito" thing and not to get involved.

In another incident, a young member had fired a gun the night before and “tagged” a housing office building. Later that evening Pura Vida ordered a beating of this young man. From the perspective of Pura Vida, this man’s behavior had unnecessarily brought the police into the neighborhood, thereby disrupting their drug trade. Following the beating, there was no more tagging in the area for at least a couple of months.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how within the context of San Antonio, a Mexican American adult prison gang has been able to dominate the heroin market and other street-based drug sellers and dealers such as youth gangs. A major consequence of this was the increasing use of heroin among Mexican American gang members and the transformation of many of these from autonomous youth gangs to extensions of the adult prison gangs or their demise. This transition is accomplished through the co-optation of gang members as in the case of the Nine Ball Crew or, in some cases, by outright violent coercion, threats, and abuse.

Gangs most susceptible to the latter were those gangs or gang members selling heroin and cocaine in specific areas that adult prison gangs self-identified as their territories. These areas tended to be located within or around public housing projects, where homes of many recently released convicted felons returning from state and federal prisons are located. Others highly susceptible to heroin use and co-optation by Pura Vida were the barrio-territorial and transitional barrio gangs comprised of user/sellers primarily buying for personal consumption, and selling a portion of the drugs to offset the costs associated with their drug use. This user-seller behavior has been observed with some consistency across the different types of illegal drugs in varied geographic contexts (Andrade, Sifaneck, & Neaigus, 1999). Many of these polydrug users began to use heroin more frequently and became addicted.

The prison gang’s monopoly of the heroin market constrained and narrowed other actor’s participation in this market including nonprison gang affiliated adults. They transformed the heroin market from one that was a highly diversified marketplace with a wide array of individual entrepreneurs operating independently toward a more corporate-dominated market place (Venkatesh, 2000). They were able to create a demand for their product by encouraging the use of heroin through noninjecting methods, which was perceived as less of a risk than injecting. They controlled the distribution by elimination of the competition and dictating market prices. However, unlike the situation in New York when the sudden change from a restricted and controlled market in the 1970s to a fully deregulated market increased use of cocaine and spawned intense competition for territory and market share” (Fagan, 1996, p. 59), the opposite occurred in San Antonio. That is, in a restricted and controlled market environment where competition decreased, heroin increased. Gang members energies thus, became focused on criminal and quasi-criminal activities related to generating resources to purchase heroin. In many cases this behavior led them away from their responsibilities as gang members. Thomas (1991) suggests a similar phenomena occurred in New York where the demise of Puerto Rican and Black youth gangs in the 1960s was linked to a heroin epidemic during this period.

A few youth gangs were able to maintain their autonomy either by not selling heroin or resisting through violence (Valdez, 2003). The latter was the case with La Poloma Blanca and the Chicano Dudes, who were two of the few to resist the adult prison gang. La Poloma was able to do it because of its strong ties to nonprison gang adult criminals and other community-level resources embedded in specific neighborhoods. These gang members come from what Joan Moore has identified as “cholo families,” which are families with a street orientation, incarceration histories, and drug use. The Chicano Dudes were able to

resist the prison gang through the defiant behavior of the gang's leaders and hardcore members who were willing to use violence and mobilize other resources to defend their commitments.

Regardless of the heroin market's transformation, the role of youth gangs in this drug market was never very substantial. Based on these findings, we concur with gang researchers that have argued that gangs have a "negligible role" in drug distributions (Curtis, 2003; Decker, Bynum, & Weisel, 1998; Fagan, 1996). Klein (1995) in particular has argued that few gangs are involved in drug selling and dealing as organizations that share profits with its members. In the data presented here only seven gangs were organized, criminal, drug dealing enterprises. Except for two of these gangs, they either were co-opted by the prison gang or ceased to exist. However, what is emerging in San Antonio is a mechanism for the transition of selective youth gang members to adult organized crime groups. This finding is different from most gang researchers who argue that there remains a disjunction between adolescent and adult groups (Fagan, 1996; Moore, 1992). This linkage may be occurring because of the critical mass of offenders being released from prison in these and other minority communities that correspond with the declining opportunities in formal job markets (Pettit & Western, 2004).

In conclusion, drug markets seem to have their most pernicious impact when they are organized and dominated by corporate style drug dealing organizations rather than more street level sellers and dealers such as youth gang members. The existence of corporate style dealers such as adult prison gangs in economically marginalized communities is more likely to market drugs like heroin that have higher profit margins. As demonstrated by this study, corporate style dealers in these types of drug markets may also lead to greater levels of hard drug use and addiction by young gang members. This seems to contribute to the breakdown of community-based institutions including the economy, family, and peer-based friendship groups such as gangs. The extent to which this happens in similar communities in different regions of the U.S. and other places in the world needs further study.

The methodological limitations of our study need to be acknowledged. Common with other ethnographic and qualitative studies, the generalizability of the results is limited to communities with similar characteristics. Even then, ethnographic studies of drug dealing and markets often arrive at seemingly contradictory findings in relatively similar communities (Hagedorn, 1998; Taylor, 1990). South Texas, with its proximity to Mexican trafficking operations, may present so special a context that replication of our findings would be problematic. Another limitation may revolve around issues of reactivity, even though we had during the course of this research no indication that this was a problem. Much of this we attribute to the rapport established by the indigenous field-workers and an understanding by the subjects that we were not making any judgments on their drug use or criminal activities. Nonetheless, deeper and more extended qualitative research needs to be initiated in other cities with gang members and drug markets of other ethnicities in order to further evaluate the significance of the findings from this single study.

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