

the gangs of new york

The Gangs of New York: A Deep Dive into History, Culture, and Legacy

the gangs of new york have long fascinated historians, writers, and filmmakers alike. These groups, often romanticized and vilified, played a crucial role in shaping the social and political fabric of the city during the 19th and early 20th centuries. From brutal street brawls to complex alliances, the gangs of this era were more than just criminal outfits; they were, in many ways, reflections of the turbulent times and the melting pot that was New York City.

Origins of the Gangs of New York

The roots of the gangs stretch back to the mid-1800s, a period marked by rapid immigration, urban expansion, and intense social upheaval. Waves of Irish, German, Italian, and other immigrant communities flooded into the city, often settling in overcrowded neighborhoods where poverty and discrimination were rampant. These conditions created a fertile ground for gang formation as groups banded together for protection, economic survival, and influence.

Socioeconomic Factors Behind Gang Formation

The gangs of New York didn't emerge in a vacuum. Many young men found themselves shut out of legitimate employment opportunities and faced hostility from established communities. This exclusion fostered a sense of camaraderie and identity within ethnic enclaves. Gangs often started as neighborhood watch groups but evolved into more organized units engaged in political maneuvering, extortion, and street violence.

Key Players: Notorious Gangs and Their Leaders

Some of the most infamous gangs included the Dead Rabbits, the Bowery Boys, and the Five Points Gang. Leaders like William "Bill the Butcher" Poole and Monk Eastman became legendary figures, commanding loyalty and fear in equal measure. Their influence extended beyond street fights, often impacting local elections and police appointments through voter intimidation and bribery.

Life Inside the Gangs of New York

Understanding the gangs requires looking beyond their violent reputation to the social dynamics within. Life in these groups was governed by codes of honor, loyalty, and sometimes brutal discipline. Membership often meant having a support network in a city that could otherwise be hostile and unforgiving.

Daily Realities and Challenges

Gang members faced constant threats—not just from rival groups but from law enforcement and sometimes even their own communities. They had to navigate a precarious balance between criminal activities like gambling, theft, and bootlegging, and maintaining some semblance of normal life. For many, joining a gang was less about crime and more about survival and identity.

Symbols, Rituals, and Identity

The gangs developed distinct symbols, clothing styles, and rituals to set themselves apart. Tattoos, colors, and specific hand signs were common, signaling allegiance and warning rivals. These markers helped foster a sense of belonging and were an early form of branding that communicated power and territory.

The Gangs and Politics: An Intricate Relationship

One of the less discussed but fascinating aspects of the gangs of New York is their entanglement with politics. During the 19th century, political machines like Tammany Hall relied heavily on gangs to deliver votes and maintain control in immigrant neighborhoods.

Political Influence and Corruption

Gangs were often hired as enforcers during elections, intimidating voters and stuffing ballot boxes. In return, politicians turned a blind eye to their criminal enterprises or even facilitated their activities. This symbiotic relationship helped cement gang power and influence, making them kingmakers in certain districts.

Impact on Law Enforcement

This political protection complicated law enforcement efforts. Police officers were frequently bribed or threatened, which made it difficult to curb gang violence and corruption. The blurred lines between criminals, politicians, and police created an environment where lawlessness could flourish with relative impunity.

The Cultural Legacy of the Gangs of New York

Though the height of gang activity in New York has long passed, their legacy continues to influence contemporary culture. Books, movies, and television shows have drawn inspiration from the gritty tales of these groups, often blending fact and fiction to capture the imagination.

Representation in Media

Films like Martin Scorsese's "Gangs of New York" brought renewed attention to these historical figures, highlighting the complex social forces at play. Literature and documentaries have also explored the era, offering nuanced perspectives that challenge simplistic portrayals of gangs as mere criminals.

Influence on Modern Urban Culture

Elements of the gangs' identity—such as territoriality, symbols, and codes of conduct—can still be seen in some contemporary street cultures and subcultures. Understanding this connection provides insight into how historical patterns of community and conflict evolve over time.

Lessons From the Past: What the Gangs of New York Teach Us Today

Studying the gangs of New York reveals broader truths about immigration, urbanization, and social justice. The conditions that gave rise to these groups—poverty, exclusion, and political corruption—are issues that persist in various forms around the world.

Addressing Root Causes

Rather than focusing solely on crime, looking at how social inequities and systemic failures contribute to gang formation offers a more effective approach to prevention. Investing in education, economic opportunities, and community-building can reduce the allure of gang membership for vulnerable youth.

The Importance of Historical Awareness

By understanding the historical context of the gangs of New York, we can better appreciate the complexities of urban life and the resilience of marginalized communities. History reminds us that behind the headlines of violence and crime are stories of identity, survival, and human connection.

Exploring the gangs of New York takes us beyond sensational headlines into a rich tapestry of history and humanity. Their stories serve as a vivid reminder of how cities transform through conflict and cooperation, and how the past continually shapes our present.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'The Gangs of New York' about?

'The Gangs of New York' is a historical drama film directed by Martin Scorsese that portrays the violent conflicts between rival gangs in New York City during the mid-19th century, focusing on themes of immigration, corruption, and social upheaval.

Who are the main characters in 'The Gangs of New York'?

The main characters include Amsterdam Vallon, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, Bill the Butcher, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, and Priest Vallon, played by Liam Neeson.

Is 'The Gangs of New York' based on a true story?

Yes, the film is loosely based on Herbert Asbury's 1927 non-fiction book 'The Gangs of New York,' which documents the real-life gang culture and political corruption in 19th-century New York City.

What historical events are depicted in 'The Gangs of New York'?

The film depicts events surrounding the New York Draft Riots of 1863, the rise of political machines like Tammany Hall, and the social tensions between native-born Americans and immigrant communities.

How was the critical reception of 'The Gangs of New York'?

The film received generally positive reviews, praised for its direction, performances (especially Daniel Day-Lewis), production design, and historical detail, though some critics noted its length and pacing as drawbacks.

Where was 'The Gangs of New York' filmed?

Much of the film was shot on a massive set built in Cinecittà Studios in Rome, Italy, which recreated 19th-century New York City streets in great detail.

Additional Resources

The Gangs of New York: A Historical and Cultural Investigation

the gangs of new york have long captured the imagination of historians, filmmakers, and sociologists alike. These groups, often rooted in the turbulent socio-economic conditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries, played a pivotal role in shaping the urban landscape and cultural identity of New York City. From violent street battles to political corruption, the story of these gangs is intertwined with the broader narrative of immigration, poverty, and the fight for power in one of America's most iconic cities.

Historical Context of The Gangs of New York

The rise of gangs in New York City can be traced back to the mid-1800s, a period marked by rapid urbanization and a massive influx of immigrants. Irish, Italian, German, and other ethnic groups arrived in waves, often settling in overcrowded neighborhoods where competition for jobs and resources was fierce. These conditions fostered the emergence of street gangs that offered protection, identity, and a means of survival.

One of the most infamous gangs of this era was the Dead Rabbits, primarily composed of Irish immigrants. Their rivalry with other gangs like the Bowery Boys was not only about territory but also about cultural and political dominance. These groups often clashed violently, influencing local elections and law enforcement through intimidation and corruption. This era also saw the development of organized crime structures that would evolve into more sophisticated syndicates later in the 20th century.

The Socioeconomic Factors Behind Gang Formation

Understanding the gangs of New York requires an analysis of the socioeconomic environment that nurtured them. Immigrant communities faced systemic discrimination, limited employment opportunities, and substandard living conditions. Gangs often filled the void left by inadequate social services, providing a sense of belonging and financial support.

In many cases, gang membership was a pragmatic choice rather than a mere pursuit of violence or criminality. These organizations sometimes acted as informal social networks, helping members find work or navigate the complexities of urban life. However, the darker side of this dynamic involved extortion, racketeering, and violent enforcement of territorial boundaries.

The Evolution of Gang Culture in New York City

As New York City modernized, so too did its gangs. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the transition from loosely organized street gangs to more structured criminal enterprises. This evolution coincided with the rise of political machines like Tammany Hall, which often employed gang members as enforcers and vote manipulators.

From Street Gangs to Organized Crime

By the early 1900s, the criminal landscape in New York was dominated not only by ethnic street gangs but also by emerging mafia families. Italian-American groups, for example, began to consolidate power, moving beyond petty crimes to control illegal markets such as gambling, prostitution, and bootlegging during Prohibition.

This shift marked a significant transformation in the nature of gang activity. The focus moved from street-level violence to strategic control of lucrative enterprises, often with the complicity or corruption of political figures and law enforcement. The legacy of these organized crime families

continues to influence popular perceptions of New York's underworld.

Law Enforcement and Public Response

Throughout the history of New York's gangs, law enforcement agencies struggled to contain the violence and corruption associated with these groups. Early police forces were often under-resourced and compromised by political interference. Efforts to crack down on gangs included the formation of specialized detective units and reforms aimed at reducing police corruption.

Public reaction to gang violence fluctuated between fear, fascination, and political mobilization. Media portrayals of gangs, from sensational newspaper reports to later cinematic depictions, contributed to a complex public understanding that mixed myth and reality.

The Cultural Impact of The Gangs of New York

The influence of New York's gangs extends beyond their immediate criminal activities. They have left an indelible mark on the city's cultural fabric, inspiring literature, film, and academic study.

Representation in Literature and Film

One of the most well-known cultural interpretations is Martin Scorsese's 2002 film "Gangs of New York," which dramatizes the violent confrontations between rival groups in the Five Points neighborhood. While the film takes artistic liberties, it brought renewed attention to a pivotal period in New York's history.

Literary works, both contemporary and historical, have also explored the themes of identity, violence, and survival within these gangs. These narratives provide insight into the human dimension behind the headlines and statistics, revealing the social complexities that define gang life.

The Legacy and Modern-Day Implications

Today, the gangs of New York exist largely as historical entities, yet their legacy persists in various forms. Modern street gangs and organized crime groups in New York City have evolved, but many of the conditions that once fueled gang activity—poverty, inequality, social exclusion—still resonate.

Understanding the historical gangs offers valuable lessons for policymakers and community leaders aiming to address urban violence and social fragmentation. It also underscores the importance of comprehensive social programs and equitable economic opportunities in preventing the rise of similar groups.

Key Features and Characteristics of The Gangs of New York

To fully grasp the dynamics of these gangs, it is useful to consider their defining features:

- **Ethnic Identity:** Many gangs were formed around shared ethnic backgrounds, providing solidarity in hostile environments.
- **Territorial Control:** Gangs often controlled specific neighborhoods, defending their turf through violence and intimidation.
- **Political Connections:** Alliances with political entities enabled gangs to influence elections and avoid prosecution.
- **Economic Activities:** Beyond violence, gangs engaged in diverse criminal enterprises including gambling, extortion, and protection rackets.
- **Social Networks:** Gangs served as informal social structures, offering members support and resources.

Comparative Analysis with Other American Urban Gangs

When compared to gangs in cities like Chicago or Los Angeles, New York's gangs were distinctive in their early ethnic composition and political entanglements. While Chicago's street gangs in the 20th century became closely tied to organized crime syndicates, and Los Angeles saw the rise of racially based gangs linked to urban poverty and drug markets, New York's early gangs were deeply embedded in the city's political machinery.

This unique interplay between gang violence and political influence is a hallmark of New York's criminal history, setting it apart from other urban centers.

The gangs of New York, with their complex history and multifaceted roles, continue to be subjects of academic research, cultural reflection, and public intrigue. Their stories reveal much about the challenges and transformations of urban America, providing a window into the forces that shape cities and communities over time.

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than the Bowery and the Five Points area. Two gangs, the Dead Rabbits and the Native Americans, were locked in a seemingly endless battle for supremacy. Amsterdam Vallon, son of the Rabbits' murdered leader, is seeking vengeance for his father's death at the hands of Bill 'The Butcher', head of the Native Americans who are in cahoots with a deeply corrupt Tammany Hall... Gangs of New York has long been a cult book. It is now the latest major film from Martin Scorsese.

the gangs of new york: The Real Gangs of New York Wallace Edwards, 2020-09-12 □□□ Is true better than fiction? □□□ The subject of a classic history by Herbert Asbury and an Academy Award-nominated film by Martin Scorsese, the gangs of The Five Points in New York have become the stuff of legend. But how much is legend and how much is fact? In this short book, we examine the original gangs of the Five Points in New York and see how accurate the film was (spoiler alert: not very) and what Asbury may have gotten wrong in his original research on this era. From the Bowery Boys to the Dead Rabbits, we look at the gangs that operated not just in the Five Points, but also those who wanted a piece of the action there and engaged in gang wars that would leave even modern thugs quivering in their boots!

the gangs of new york: Gangbusters Michael Stone, 2002-07-09 An elite homicide investigation unit takes on one of the most savage and destructive gangs in New York City history in this gritty true-crime narrative. The investigation into the late-night murder of a college student on the West Side Highway leads to the Wild Cowboys, a group of young men who for years terrorized Upper Manhattan and the Bronx while running a \$30,000-a-day drug business. What follows is a tale of dogged pursuit that offers a fascinating inside look at the workings of a complex police investigation, and a satisfying account of how a city took back its streets.

the gangs of new york: The Gangs of New York Herbert Asbury, 2023 The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld is a book by Herbert Asbury, American journalist and writer best known for his books detailing crime during the 19th and early-20th centuries. The Gangs of New York details the rise and fall of 19th century gangs in New York City, prior to the domination of the Italian-American Mafia during Prohibition in the 1920s. Focusing on the saloon halls, gambling dens, and winding alleys of the Bowery and the Five Points district of Lower Manhattan, the book evokes the destitution and violence of a turbulent era, when colorfully named criminals like Dandy Johnny Dolan, William Poole (also known as Bill the Butcher), and Hell-Cat Maggie lurked in the shadows, and infamous gangs including the Plug Uglies, Dead Rabbits, and Bowery Boys ruled the streets. It includes a rogues' gallery of prostitutes, pimps, poisoners, pickpockets, murderers, and thieves. The book contains detailed accounts of the New York City draft riots in 1863. It also elaborates on numerous other criminal influences of the time, including river pirates and the corrupt political establishment such as Tammany Hall.

the gangs of new york: Gangs Jacqueline Schneider, 2017-11-30 The task of researching gangs is fraught with difficulties, central to which are issues of definition and reliance on certain forms of data for analyses. These methodological issues have been acknowledged as limitations in most of the existing research, but they have not been explored as being potentially serious flaws contributing to the proliferation of myth, or as aggravating factors that exacerbate what is essentially a relatively uncomplicated social process. Also unclear from existing studies is the extent to which suppositions about gangs feed moral panics or contribute to the misidentification or over-specification of a problem. This captivating volume focuses on gangs, their formation, identity and behaviour with a view to developing a preventive strategy.

the gangs of new york: Borgata: Rise of Empire Louis Ferrante, 2023-11-09 The American mafia has long held powerful sway over our collective cultural imagination. But how many of us truly understand how a clandestine Sicilian criminal organisation came to exert its influence over nearly every level of American society? In BORGATA: RISE OF EMPIRE, former mafia member Louis Ferrante pulls back the curtain on the criminal organisation that transformed America. From the potent political cauldron of nineteenth-century Sicily to American cities such as New Orleans, New York and the gangster's paradise of Las Vegas, Ferrante traces the social, economic and political forces that powered the mafia's unstoppable rise. We follow the early mob as they provide alcohol to

the American public during prohibition, aid U. S. Naval Intelligence during the Second World War, establish a gambling mecca in the Nevada desert - and unofficially take control of the island of Cuba. Ferrante's vivid portrayal of early American mobsters - among them Lucky Luciano, Vito Genovese, Frank Costello and Meyer Lansky - fills in crucial gaps of mafia history to deliver the most comprehensive account yet of the world's most famous criminal fraternity. This volume is the first in a groundbreaking new trilogy from a man who has seen it all from the inside. Ferrante's masterful account journeys from the group's inauspicious beginnings to the height of their power as the most influential organised criminal network in America.

the gangs of new york: The Gangs of New York Herbert Asbury, 1939

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the gangs of new york: Global Organized Crime Mitchel P. Roth, 2017-01-20 In the maelstrom of globalization and cyberspace, organized crime continues to defy definition. A diverse array of activities is perpetuated by criminal organizations, criminal groups and associations, and gangs, and it is clear that one specific label is no longer adequate. This book offers a uniquely global approach to organized crime and the multitude of forces that shape it in the 21st century. As well as discussing definitions of and the historical roots of organized crime, this book examines various forms of organized crime around the world in the US, Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean, Russia and Europe, Asia and Africa. This revised and updated new edition includes coverage of: the rise of the 'Ndrangheta in Italy and their global expansion; the impact of drug legalization on organized crime and the problem of methamphetamine; organ trading, money laundering, and animal poaching; changes in gang traditions and gangland penitentiaries; the decentralization of Mexican cartels, the growth of opium production in Myanmar, and the drug war in Africa; and the advancement of ISIS and the emergence of the Silk Road and the Dark Net. This book is essential reading for students engaged in the study of global and transnational organized crime, with features including chapter overviews, key terms, critical thinking questions, and case studies.

the gangs of new york: The ^AYouth Gang Problem Irving A. Spergel, 1995-06-01 Every day there are new stories of gang-related crime: from the proliferation of illegal weapons in the streets and children dealing drugs in their schools, to innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire of never-ending gang wars. Once considered an urban phenomenon, gang violence is permeating American life, spreading to the suburbs and bringing the problem closer to home for much of America. The government, schools, social agencies, and the justice system are conspicuous by their sporadic interest in the subject and have failed to develop effective policies and programs. Existing social support mechanisms and strategies for suppressing violence have often been unsuccessful. And, state and federal policy is largely nonexistent. In *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach*, Irving Spergel provides a systematic analysis of youth gangs in the United States. Based on research, historical and comparative analysis, and agency documents and the author's extensive first-hand experience, the work explores the gang problem from the perspective of community disorganization, especially population movement, and the plight of the underclass. It examines the factors of gang member personality, gang dynamics, criminal organization, and the influence of family, school, prisons, and politics, as well as the response of criminal justice agencies and community groups. Spergel describes techniques used by social agencies, schools, employment programs, criminal justice agencies, and grass-roots organizations for dealing with gangs, and recommends strategies that emphasize the use of local resources, planning, and collaborative procedures. There is no single strategy and no easy solution to the youth gang problem in the United States. There are, however, substantial steps we can take, and they must be honestly and systematically tested. Offering a practical and alternative approach to a serious social problem, *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach* is a major and long-awaited contribution to this dilemma. It is required reading for criminal justice personnel, school staff, social workers, policy

makers, students and scholars of urban and organizational sociology, and the general reader concerned with the youth gang problem and how to control, intervene, and prevent it.

the gangs of new york: Gangs Scott Cummings, Daniel J. Monti, 1993-03-03 This book is an examination of contemporary gangs in American cities. Gangs have proliferated over the past ten years and pose a new set of challenges to public officials, law enforcement agencies, and urban educators. Most major cities are now confronted with serious problems derived from gang violence, drug traffic, and disruption of the public educational system. In the face of deindustrialization and deepening recession, many minority youngsters view gangs as attractive alternatives to a futile search for employment in a deteriorating urban economy. Perhaps most significant, gangs are now beginning to emerge in small and medium-sized cities. Some of the nation's leading scientists and scholars have been brought together in this book to examine the contemporary contours of America's gang problem, including Daniel J. Monti, Joan Moore, Scott Cummings, Howard Pinderhughes, Diego Vigil, Ray Hutchison, Felix Padilla, Jerome H. Skolnick, Pat Jackson, and Robert A. Destro. New material dealing with wilding gangs, migration and drug trafficking, and public educational disruption appear in this volume. Other topics covered include how gangs are organized, what social function they serve, their relation to conventional society, and the social and psychological factors that contribute to their rise. The relationship of the contemporary gang problem to past research is explored, and a rich variety of case histories and comparative analysis is presented. The book also includes a section on public policy.

the gangs of new york: Juvenile Delinquency Peter C. Kratcoski, Lucille Dunn Kratcoski, Peter Christopher Kratcoski, 2019-12-03 Combining theory with practical application, this seminal introduction to juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice integrates the latest research with emerging problems and trends in an overview of the field. Now in its sixth edition, this book features new interviews and discussions with child care professionals and juvenile justice practitioners on their experiences translating theory to practice. It addresses recent changes in the characteristics of delinquents alongside changes in laws and the rise of social media and smartphones. It includes a new chapter of international perspectives on juvenile justice and delinquency. Incorporated throughout is consideration of the mental health and special needs of youth in the juvenile justice system, as well as at-risk and non-fault children as victims. With attention to both quantitative and qualitative findings, this clear and comprehensive text will be useful for students of criminology, criminal justice, sociology and those interested in working with at-risk youth.

the gangs of new york: The Gang's All Queer Vanessa R. Panfil, 2017-08-15 Many people believe that gangs are made up of violent thugs who are in and out of jail, and who are hyper-masculine and heterosexual. Vanessa Panfil introduces us to a different world. Meet gay gang members - sometimes referred to in popular culture as homo thugs - whose gay identity complicates criminology's portrayal and representation of gangs, gang members, and gang life. In vivid detail, Panfil provides an in-depth understanding of how gay gang members construct and negotiate both masculine and gay identities through crime and gang membership. She draws from interviews with over 50 gay gang- and crime-involved young men in Columbus, Ohio, the majority of whom are men of color in their late teens and early twenties, as well as on-the-ground ethnographic fieldwork with men who are in gay, hybrid, and straight gangs. Panfil provides an eye-opening portrait of how even members of straight gangs are connected to a same-sex oriented underground world. Most of these young men still present a traditionally masculine persona and voice deeply-held affection for their fellow gang members. They also fight with their enemies, many of whom are in rival gay gangs. Most come from impoverished, 'rough' neighborhoods, and seek to defy negative stereotypes of gay and Black men as deadbeats, though sometimes through illegal activity. Some are still closeted to their fellow gang members and families, yet others fight to defend members of the gay community, even those who they deem to be fags, despite distaste for these flamboyant members of the community.

the gangs of new york: The Reflex, 1928

the gangs of new york: Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies
David Brotherton, Rafael Gude, 2021-07-28 Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang

Studies is rooted in the instability, inequality and liquidity of the post-industrial era. It understands the gang as a complex and contradictory phenomenon; a socio-historical agent that reflects, responds to and creates a certain structured environment in spaces which are always in flux. International in scope and drawing on a range of sociological, criminological and anthropological traditions, it looks beyond pathological, ahistorical and non-transformative approaches, and considers other important factors that produce the phenomenon, whether the historically entrenched racialized power structure and segregation in Chicago; the unconstrained state-abandoned development of favelas in Brazil; or the colonization, displacement and dependency of people in Central America. This handbook reflects and defines the new theoretical and empirical traditions of critical gang studies. It offers a variety of perspectives, including: A view of gangs that takes into consideration the global context and appearance of the gang in its various forms and stages of development; An appreciation of the gang as a socio-cultural formation; A race-ethnic and class analysis of the gang that problematizes domain assumptions such as the underclass; Gender variations of the gang phenomenon with a particular emphasis on their intersectional properties; Relations between gangs and the political economy that address the dominant mode of production and exchange; Treatments that demonstrate the historically contingent nature of gangs and their changes across time; The contradictory impact of gang repressive policies, institutions and practices as part of a broader discussion on the nature of the state in specific societies; and Critical methodologies on gangs that involve discussions of visual and textual representations and the problematics of data collection and analysis. Authoritative, multi-disciplinary and international, this book will be of interest to criminologists, sociologists and anthropologists alike, particularly those engaged with critical criminology/sociology, youth crime, delinquency and global social inequality. The Handbook will also be of interest to policy makers and those in the peacebuilding field.

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the gangs of new york: Life in the Gang Scott H. Decker, Barrik van Winkle, 1996-08-28 This study is based on three years of field work with 99 active gang members and 24 family members. The book describes the attractiveness of gangs, the process of joining, their chaotic and loose organisation, and their members' predominant activities - mostly hanging out, drinking, and using drugs. The authors also discuss gang members' rather slapdash involvement in major property crime and their disorganised participation in drug traffic, as well as the often fatal consequences of their violent life-style. Although the book focuses on the individual, organisational, and institutional aspects of gang membership, it also explores gang members' involvement with other school and neighborhood structures. Extensive interviews with family members provide groundbreaking insights into the gang members' lives. As much as possible, however, the story is told in the gang members' own words.

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