Chapter 4
The Reality and Myth of Weapons and Violence in Gang Life

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ABSTRACT

Weapons and violence are both real and mythic elements of gang life. Though violence is a real element of gang life, public perceptions about gangs may be exaggerated, invoking the idea of dangerous youth roaming the streets. The image of violent gang members is also embraced and used by youth on the streets to navigate their social world. Gang members often create personal and group-based myths by exaggerating their use of weapons and violence. This chapter examines the division between myth and reality in gang life. It reviews research to establish that weapons and violence are real elements of gang members’ lives throughout the world. It further explores how myths emerge among gang members who have ample motivation for fictionalizing violence and weapons use. This chapter relies on the social psychological ideas of social constructionism, interpretive socialization, and identity to explain the existence of myths in gang life.

BACKGROUND

At approximately 9:30 p.m. on July 17, 2010, during a large public event in downtown Indianapolis, a seventeen-year-old gang member affiliated with the Ratchet Boyz fired multiple shots on a crowded street. He wounded eight individuals who were all between the ages of ten and eighteen. Local news teams covering the event captured the sound of gunshots and the ensuing chaos for the public to view during the nightly newscast. Media outlets also reported that witnesses observed gang-related clothing and heard people shout the name of a rival gang before the perpetrator fired the gun. Police revealed the shooting stemmed from a conflict between two local street gangs. Officers found nine .40 caliber cartridges at the scene. A search of the shooter’s home found a box of eight unused cartridges that matched those at the scene and officers found another cartridge on the shooter at the time of arrest (State v. Patton, 2010).

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On July 23, 2011, at about 4:30 in the afternoon, a few gang members in the Seattle suburb of Kent, WA shot twelve individuals at a low-rider car show/concert held in a strip mall parking lot. Court documents indicate a rapper performing at the car show encouraged attenders to proclaim their gang affiliations. Members of the Little Valley Lokates, Varrios Locos, and Playboy Surenos were in attendance. The latter two gangs were rivals and a confrontation between the groups quickly ensued. Shortly before the shooting, witnesses at another car show a few miles away noticed members of the Surenos gang quickly drive off in three cars. They arrived at the strip mall a few minutes later. During this time a member of the Varrios Locos began punching a member of the Surenos. One of the cars that had just arrived circled the lot, opened fire, and fled the scene. Two individuals exited another car, approached on foot, shot into the crowd, and returned to their car leaving a chaotic scene behind. Police found seventeen shell casings from five different guns at the scene. About eight hours later, in an apparent retaliation, a member of the Surenos gang was shot in the shoulder at his apartment by a .45 caliber handgun that was also fired one time during the earlier incident. The ensuing investigation led police to confiscate multiple .9mm handguns, a .380 caliber handgun, and a .223 rifle (State v. Moreno et al., 2011).

INTRODUCTION

Weapons and violence are both real and mythic elements of gang life. High profile and widely reported incidents of gun violence, like those from Indianapolis and Seattle, influence perceptions about gangs and gang violence. Yet such stories rarely include information that places these incidents within the context of crime trends over time, the nature and prevalence of gang violence, and the frequency of violence in the daily lives of gang members. Public perceptions about gangs may be skewed or exaggerated, raising fears about the prevalence of dangerous youth roaming the streets. The image of gun-toting, violent gang members is not just created by outsiders. It is also embraced and used by youth on the streets to navigate their social world. When gang members interact with peers, they often create personal and group-based myths by exaggerating their willingness and ability to use weapons and violence. The division between myth and reality is sometimes hard to discern in gang life.

To argue that weapons and violence become part of a fictional, alternative reality about street gangs is not to deny their presence in gang members’ lives. It does force one to carefully examine how reality can become distorted to influence both perceptions and behaviors. Hacking (1999) makes the important distinction between an object, which is an indisputable element of reality, and the ideas people have about an object. Ideas about objects (or events) can become alternative and influential forms of reality. The shootings in Indianapolis and Seattle are objects of gun violence grounded in real events. They accounted for twenty victims, multiple shooters, and numerous guns. No one would argue the wounds suffered by victims were anything less than real. These events are, however, connected to exaggerated ideas about gang violence that can fuel public fear. They can also be used by members of those gangs to develop group-based myths about violence that influences their status in the streets. This chapter argues that weapons and violence are prominent features of gang life, yet social processes in and outside of gang life produce powerful myths about gangs. It also relies on social constructionism, interpretive socialization, and the concept of identity to explain the existence of myths in gang life.