Chapter 9
In Hand, Out of Hand: Weapons and Violence Culture in Large Latino Gangs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates the nature and function of weapons in Latino gang culture, and is divided into three parts. It begins by defining Latino gangs in the Americas, and classifying them into Mexican-American gangs, Mexican gangs, and Central American gangs. Despite differences in region, economic situation, generations and cultural characteristics, I draw broad similarities by focusing specifically on large, organized gangs within each of the three classifications. The second section interrogates the logics and motivations driving gangs' use of weapons, along with the psychological and instrumental functions of weapons use for Latino gangs. The chapter's third section is a substantial conclusion which argues for approaches to gang-violence which derive from the field of peace and conflict studies, including short-term approaches to violence reduction (gang ceasefires and truces) and longer term, ecological approaches based on the theoretical framework of community resilience.

ELIZABETH'S STORY

Elizabeth had served in the Air Force and was living comfortably on the East Coast, when she learned her twin sister had been murdered in Los Angeles, California. She and her mom immediately flew out to recover the body, and find out what had happened. Hospital workers provided the details of the death: Elizabeth’s sister had been cut open from esophagus to stomach. But after speaking with her sister’s friends, Elizabeth learned the rest of the story: her sister had been trafficking drugs across the border for the gang MS-13. A bag of heroin burst inside her, and gang members had cut her open to retrieve the product. A few days later, Elizabeth’s mother suffered a massive heart attack and died...In that traumatized state, having lost her twin sister and her mother, Elizabeth decided to join MS-13 to find the perpetrators. She began hanging out with her sisters’ friends, who were affiliated with the same gang. Her sister’s friends used drugs, and so she began using the same drugs – crystal meth and heroin.
needed to fit in. And it wasn’t long before she began dating a gang member in order to gain entry. But the cost of entry was higher than she could have imagined: she was gang-raped by 13 guys and then given a knife and told to fight for her life. Afterwards, they gave her more drugs, and she took them. She took them to numb the pain. She took them because now she wanted them....Elizabeth became completely absorbed into ‘the life’. In a bitter irony, she ended up working for years with MS-13 trafficking other women from Mexico into San Diego, along with drugs, and herself working as a prostitute. This what they call ‘the life’.

ALEX’S STORY

Alex is the grandson of a founding member of a large prison gang in the United States. He was “born into the gang” as he described it, becoming a member when he was only 11. It was expected, he explained, because his grandfather and uncle were was such a high-ranking member. “My cousins gave me my first joint at 10”, he recalls. “My mother found us and was so pissed off! She didn’t want them corrupting me. But there wasn’t nothing she could really do.” Alex had a rough home life. Like the vast majority of people who end up in a gang, he suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of his parents. When I meet him, I am astounded by his eloquence and intellect. Alex went to private schools and has a degree in Finance from a well-known university. Those skills, however, he put to use running various aspects of business for his prison gang. He was also an assassin for the organization. “If you saw my record, you’d be shocked” he tells me, before sharing a litany of violent acts – some of which prosecutors do not know about. Alex is highly trained in heavy weaponry, including rocket launchers, and reveals that his organization has a significant stockpile (and pipeline) of military weapons. Most surprising for me was the disconnect between the calm, young man in front of me and his revelations that he enjoyed violence, that he loved killing. Alex has been reflecting on this while in prison, and tells me that ultimately he traces it back to a childhood bereft of basic compassion. Alex is married, and is serving 30 years.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about the logics of gang life, and how weapons fit into it.

If we want to understand about the relationship between people in gangs and weapons, we have to start by seeing the world in which armed violence makes sense: the intergang environment. It is a highly competitive social space where trust is contracted to small circles, and projection of strength is a required life skill. Gangs often live immediate environments equivalent to that of a warzone, and their mentality reflects a heightened state of conflict escalation1, which includes the development of hostile attitudes, perceptions, and goals toward ‘other’ groups. Gangs therefore live by values and beliefs that support the use of violence to settle disputes, achieve group goals, recruit members, and defend identity (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007).

Like any social identity group, gang members in their respective trusted circles share an understanding of the world they believe is unique to their particular group. Gangs employ coded languages, customs, beliefs, symbols, and patterns of behavior, which differentiate them from ‘others’ in the intergang environment. They differ, however, in their use of violence, and weapons. Violence, varying from killing,
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