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**Barrio Criminal Networks and Prison Gang Formation in Texas**

by

Mike Tapia

**Abstract**

This study traces the origins of Latino prison gangs in Texas with a focus on the Mexican Mafia in San Antonio. This historical analysis covering the past several decades is informed by archival material, interviews of 1950's and 1960's-era barrio gang members, and by other qualitative data. Specific hypotheses about the forces driving prison gang formation and their norms are articulated. I find evidence of modern "period effects" that impacted prison gang structure and their violence norms. I also find support for the claim that the Texas Mexican Mafia descended from a particular, notorious drug gang of the 1970's, due to their shared geography and barrio network structure. This overall framework allows for an exploration of the effects of social change and "modernity" on the sophistication and intensity of Chicano gang structures.

**Introduction**

Where criminal organizations emerge as functional adaptations to the social structure, the forces propelling their formation are not temporary social phenomena, nor are they unique to Latinos. Like gangs of other races, gang contexts in major Latino population centers have lengthy historical bases rooted in weak opportunity structures, oppression, and discrimination, as illustrated in the literature for El Paso (Campbell 2009), Los Angeles (Mirandé 1987; Moore 1978, Vigil 1988) and Denver (Duran 2012), to name a few. There are, however, several qualities of Latino gangs, and Chicano gangs in particular that do set them apart from gangs of other races and ethnic groups.
Of the various ethnic-based gangs that have emerged in America's slums over time, the Chicano gang in particular is most noted for its intergenerational and territorial features (Moore, Vigil, and Garcia 1983; Spergel 1990). Compared to black or other ethnic street gangs, Chicano barrio gangs that emerged in the 1940's and 1950's were more clearly defined by the neighborhoods where they originated than for their criminal "specialties" (Horowitz 1983; Moore et al. 1983; Vigil 1990). These elements create group longevity via the reproduction of the gang in successive generations, making these types of ethnic gang populations particularly conducive to historical exploration.

Chicano gangs are typically comprised of an age-graded hierarchy of "kitkas", beginning with pre-teen and early teen "pee-wee" sets, on to "callies" in their late teens and early 20's (Vigil 1990). In the modern era, adult prison gangs are at the top of this hierarchy. Yet academic depictions of the genesis and evolution of these criminal groups are rather scarce in the crime research, especially of those in Texas. The current work helps to fill this gap with a historical case-study of developments in San Antonio over the last several decades.

Prison Gangs & The Research Setting

Since their emergence in the late 1950's, prison gangs have represented one of the most pernicious forms of organized crime in the U.S. They are security threat groups inside prisons and an ongoing challenge to law enforcement on the streets (National Gang Intelligence Center 2016). The two states accounting for the largest proportion of these groups are California and Texas (Trulson, Marquart, and Kawuehe, 2006), where their intensity increased around the late 1970's and early 1980's. Whereas California prison gangs have long been the focus of some academic (e.g. Davidson 1974; Skarbek 2012), and much journalistic or popular media attention (e.g. Blatchford 2009; Rafael 2007; Valdez and Enriquez 2011; Wood 2014), this is far less true of those in Texas. Yet, as Texas has the second largest state prison system and the third highest imprisonment rate in the nation (Coyle 2003), prison gangs have had a profound impact on lockup facilities and the criminal underworld in that state.

In Texas and California alike, Latino gangs are considered the biggest threat by correctional and law enforcement communities (California Department of Justice 2010; Texas Department of Public Safety 2015). The emergence of these groups in California in the late 1950's preceded that of Texas by about twenty years. This is perhaps one reason we know far more about the history and structure of those groups than we do about those in Texas. Where Latino prison and street gang operations are now widely-known to be reciprocal in nature (e.g. Mirande 1987; Morrill 2007; Valdez et al. 2009; Valdez and Enriquez 2011), this paper explores some of the barrio-based criminal networks and the social changes that gave rise to Texas prison gang emergence in the 1980's. As San Antonio is one of the larger Texas cities rich in barrio gang history, it serves as a poignant case-study for this topic.

Texas Prison Gangs

Race-based gangs in Texas prisons date back to the late 1970's and remain normative today. Their formation is linked to systematic racial segregation and an inmate-based informal control mechanism prior to the implementation of reforms (Fong 1990; Pelz et al. 1991; Trulson and Marquart 2002). Although racial segregation in Texas prisons has been legally prohibited since 1979 (Marquart and Crouch 1984), the ad-hoc social grouping of inmates continued to occur along racial lines over the next few decades. Court-mandated integration quotas for the general prison population were achieved as of the early 1990's, but for security and facility management concerns, gang-members continued to be grouped by race and gang faction (Trulson and Marquart 2002).

Reliable estimates of the size of a prison gang population are difficult to obtain due to the varying methods used to count them across systems. Trulson et al. (2006) noted that while many states now use a strict confirmation process to identify gang members, others still include street gang members and other security threat groups in their counts. An additional complication is the conceptual fluidity of gang membership. As with street gangs, there are varying levels of individual involvement by prison gang members, from associate to core member, replete with routine attempts to conceal one's affiliation.

A group of studies using recent surveys of state prison administrators and other personnel have produced various estimates of the size of the gang population. Winteryd and Ruddell (2010) reviewed this literature and found that prison officials' perceptions tend to hover around 12 to 13 percent, with at least one estimate as high as 24 percent in 1999. Using somewhat more official counts of confirmed gang members in the federal prison system, Gaus et al. (2002) found that nine percent of male inmates were gang involved. Finally, a 2002 national survey of state and federal prison systems using a BOP designation of gang membership reported only 15,398 prison gang members (1.2 percent of the total prison population) with fewer than 1,000 gang members in most states (Trulson et al. 2006). California and Texas accounted for a large majority of these (nearly 70 percent) with more than 5,000 prison gang members each. Based on the latter estimate, the size of the prison gang population in Texas appears to have remained steady over the past decade. The Houston Chronicle recently reported that 5,205 inmates were in 23 hour per day administrative segregation specifically for issues related to their gang affiliation (Schiller 2011). This number reflects about 3.5 percent of the total prison population in that state.
Latino Factions

For many years, the dominant Latino gangs in Texas prisons have included the Texas Syndicate (TS) the Texas Mexican Mafia (Eme), and Hermandad de Pistoleros Latinos (a.k.a. HPL, or “Los Pistoleros”). These groups continue to have vast networks-reaching every major city and other smaller places throughout the state, but several predominates in certain places. The TS is the oldest and most established Latino prison gang in Texas (Fong 1990) and its nucleus is Austin (Travis County). The TS are most prominent in the central and eastern region and thus also has a strong presence in San Antonio. The home base of the Texas Mexican Mafia (a.k.a. Mexikanemari or Eme) is widely known by justice system practitioners, other gang observers, and the local general public to be San Antonio (Bexar County). Los Pistoleros do not have a particular stronghold, but do have a presence in San Antonio. They, along with Raza Unida and the Texas Chicano Brotherhood, are one of the more formidable gangs in the prison and urban landscape statewide. Finally, in far west Texas, Barrio Azteca dominates, having ties to the Carrillo-Fuentes (Juarez) drug cartel in Chihuahua, Mexico (U.S. Department of Justice 2012).

Membership Composition & Rules of Engagement

One quality of Latino prison gangs that make them an especially complex social problem to address is the social class origin of its members. These groups are borne in state facilities, which tend to house poor, violent, serious, and habitual offenders, relative to those on community or federal supervision (Western 2006). Potential recruits into Latino prison gangs typically come from “street” oriented families and are known to law enforcement for their lengthy or violent criminal histories, often extending to their juvenile street gang days. These individuals were not marginal members of youth gangs, but usually held leadership positions or were loyal soldiers with lucrative skills in auto theft, burglary, armed robbery and the like. A willingness and reputation for meting out violence against rivals also makes one a valuable asset to a gang, even if it is the individual’s main or sole contribution. A potential prison gang recruit thus possesses a high “street-IQ”.

Despite the fact that most prison gang recruits are members of the urban underclass, prison gangs are highly regimented organizations whose members must exercise self-discipline to stay within the constitutional and informal rules of the group (Tapia et al. 2014; Valdez 2005). If an individual aspires to become a prison gang member, whether he will advance to recruitment and survival within the group not only depends on his criminal “track record”, but also on his academic-IQ, levels of self-control, and charisma. This includes the ability to share profits, obtain permission from superiors for certain actions, and to follow orders, some of which are extreme actions such as committing homicide. The inability of many members to follow these rules, coupled with intra-group politics and power struggles has resulted in numerous intra-group murders and dozens of absconds1 over the years.

Central Thesis & Roadmap

This relatively recent development in formalized prison gang structure in Texas marks a significant change in the norms that typically govern underworld politics and processes in the state. Whereas the smaller, more localized crime rings of the pre-1980’s pioneered some of the techniques used to terrorize would-be competitors and discipline those within the ranks of their organizations, this brand of violence would become widespread among Chicano prison gangs in Texas throughout the 1980’s and ’90’s. This paper argues a certain viewpoint about the origins of this shift to systematic, normalized violence and a formalized, hierarchical structure. I explore the effects of “modernity” in underworld politics ushered in by the growth of underclass populations, the drug trade, and the increased use of incarceration in the late 1960’s and early ’70’s. The strong geographical connection between a particular 1970’s drug ring based in San Antonio (the Fred Carrasco clan) and the most notorious of the Texas prison gangs to date, the Texas Mexican Mafia, (herself, La Eme), also forms the basis for a “predecessor” argument. I first introduce the latter phenomenon, then describe data and methods, and finally, expand to the broader social analysis that details the “modernity” thesis.

Barrio Roots and The Fred Carrasco Drug Ring

Fred Carrasco was perhaps the most well-known barrio-boy turned drug boss to emerge from San Antonio’s slums. His life is chronicled in The Heroic Merchant by Wilson McKinney (1975), and in portions of books more recently written by David Montejano (2010), and Ben Olguin (2010). Those works characterize Carrasco as a charismatic, intelligent Chicano who easily could have been successful in legitimate pursuits. He employed many San Antonio barrio gang youth in the illegal drug business, which is barely recognized in prior works on his life, but it is common knowledge among the many persons interviewed for the current study. My critique of McKinney (1975) is that it is a limited perspective of this era’s underworld dynamics, often viewed through the lens of the narcotics detectives he shadowed.1 His work didn’t chronicle the barrio connections to fully illustrate the importance of the street to higher level operations across generations. Therefore, the current paper better defines the network structure that preceded and enabled a character like Carrasco to emerge from the barrio. In turn, I show how the structure and violent tactics of the Carrasco clan influenced the prison gangs of the next generation who would come to dominate the 1980’s heroin trade. A competing perspective put forth by other authors, law enforcement experts, and other detractors of the Texas Eme is that the group emulated the California Eme’s structure, a claim that is also addressed herein.
Data and Methods

This paper is extracted from an ongoing research project on the barrio gangs and criminal networks of San Antonio, Texas in historical perspective. The broader work traces the evolution of such groups to modern day, noting aspects of the Chicano barrio gang subculture that are durable over time, and aspects that have undergone changes in the face of modernity. The work is informed by a wide range of qualitative data to include archival material, personal interviews, and nearly two decades of field observation of criminal subcultures in San Antonio. The current study utilizes the information that was gathered on the topic of generational shift, changes in norms, and the emergence of prison gangs in that locale.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with surviving members of 1950’s era barrio street gangs. Subjects were recruited with snowball sampling, mainly by a word-of-mouth referral system. Some of these screening to authenticate the claim that one was a gang member. With the subject’s permission, structured interviews were audiotaped. If the interviewees preferred not to be audio-taped, various forms of data were collected on paper, to include written responses to a questionnaire. I regularly shared my ongoing compilation of information for subjects to review and correct or add to regarding their own gangs, rival and neutral gangs, on pintos (ex-cons) and on others who were mentados (reputable) in the street-scene in San Antonio from the late 1940’s through about 1980.

Unstructured and semi-structured focus group discussions in the retirement home residences of some subjects, in cafes, diners, and bars, were also a big part of the fieldwork. Group meetings were enabled by the fact that many of the surviving members are friends or acquaintances. This was even the case for most of the men who were from rival gangs, and who can now laugh and swap stories together. There were several exceptions, however. There were a few cases involving the surviving siblings of murder victims and other intense rivalries that did not allow for the subjects to interact freely or comfortably, even after nearly 60 years had passed.

Ranging in age from the mid 70’s to mid 80’s, surviving members of 1950’s barrio gangs were a small and hard-to-find group. Several subjects have passed away since taking part in the study, which began in the summer of 2012, carried over three consecutive years. Unfortunately, several reputable individuals who were still alive when the research began passed away before they could be recruited into the study and interviewed. The 33 total subjects recruited were all reputable former gang members who were “vouched for” by various segments of the community, but namely by each other.

Findings

About a decade before the Texas Eme established its street level activities in the 1980’s in San Antonio, it was the “homebase” for the Fred Carrasco group, who succeeded the Melchor de los Santos drug gang of the 1960’s. These groups primarily operated out of San Antonio’s quintessential Chicano barrio, the inner Westside (San Antonio Light 1964). A young Fred Carrasco worked for the de los Santos clan, all of who had been members of Westside barrio street gangs in their youth (McKinney 1975). The founding members of la Eme, like their predecessors, were also in Westside barrio gangs as youth. There is thus a shared background in the general orientation, the street networks, and lived experience of members of all these successive groups, separated by only about half a generation in most cases. The social conditions of the barrio and experiences of Chicano males with the criminal justice system, for example, are comparable in both eras (pre and post 1970’s). Indeed, the current study found that some of the children of 1950’s and 1960’s barrio gang members became prison gang members in one of three major groups operating in San Antonio since the 1980’s (Eme, Texas Syndicate, and Los Pistoleros). For most, the tie is to la Eme, due to its strong presence in that city. Idolized by many young Chicano street gang members of the post 1980’s era, la Eme became a household name in the barrios of San Antonio.

Of the brand of street crime seen in San Antonio through the early 1960’s, McKinney (1975: 13) wrote it was “acquainted at worst to the violence of the juvenile street gangs and Saturday night barroom brawls”. The late 1960’s and early 1970’s, however ushered in a new style of extreme tactics to accompany increases in the volume of drug trafficking, and thus higher stakes in this business. This period is commonly known as the “Carrasco era”, as this group in particular seemed to set a new standard for drug related violence in its operations that many feared and that future generations would follow.

As a typical example of the legacy of the Carrasco group was a shootout at “Gil’s Place”, a bar in the deep Westside in 1970 that killed three and injured three (San Antonio Express News 1970). Interview data from a research subject who worked there at the time (in addition to other interviewees) revealed that it was a group of Carrasco’s pistoleros who shot up the place over a dispute with the owner and some of the staff. Although never prosecuted for it, two well-known former barrio gang youth who became members of the west side’s de los Santos drug gang were said to be among the group of men who did the shooting. This shootout was an example of a new era of growing ruthlessness in carrying out operations, and in the basic demeanor of its members in handling disputes.

Fred Carrasco’s drug ring would become by far the most successful and reputable of the San Antonio-based drug gangs operating in the early 1970’s. Carrasco had a particular style of governance that his Mexican operatives both feared and at-times found peculiar, as members were required to take a sworn oath of allegiance to the group (under veiled and direct threats from Fred). These typically occurred at critical points in their smuggling maneuvers when the stakes were high (McKinney 1975). Interestingly, there are several places in McKinney’s work where the Carrasco group is referred to as the Mexican Mafia by keen
observers, lawmen, and even in a narco-cortito written about the group by Daniel Garcez in 1973. However, a group by this name per se didn’t actually yet exist until the Eme emerged in c.a. 1984 (Fong 1990).

One of the key mechanisms used by Carrasco to set he and his group apart from most others involved in the drug trade was intimidation on the street and the ruthless use of violence within the organization. The common refrain heard among my interviewees on this topic was “Fred wanted to control everything”. One stated, “if you were scoring [dope] from someone besides Fred, and he found out about it, he came to your place and threatened you” (“Erasmio”, Calle Guadalupe Barrio). Carrasco’s operation became notorious in San Antonio rather quickly because it was known to eliminate members of its own group for perceived treachery. These tactics alarmed the public and politicians of the era who viewed it as a new breed of gangsterism in the region that sought to emulate the Italian mafia (McKinney 1975).

The high intensity level Carrasco employed in running his organization seems to stem, in part, from the cultural and economic contexts that produced him. To begin, he was a product of an era of intense barrio gang warfare as a youth, having grown up in those neighborhoods most affected, and was known and respected by his peers (Montejano 2010). While seemingly more independent-minded than the barrio youth who fell in with their respective groups, he proved to be violence-prone as a young man, picking up a murder charge at age 18 (McKinney 1975). He was not known to be a drug user himself, which also set him apart from many typical barrio youth. Lastly, as the demand for drugs in the barrio was rapidly increasing when he was released from prison in the early 1960’s, the economic incentive, the timing, and his connection to the de los Santos group created the ideal conditions for his rise to power.

My contention is that groups like la Eme took their cue from the Carrasco era clans, but elevated their intensity to its logical end. Their trademarks are “blood in” initiations, taking sworn oaths of membership, collecting taxes from non-mafia drug dealers, killing its own for transgressions, and killing competitors (Valdez et al. 2009). They engaged in war with rival prison gangs of other races and bloody battles with other Latino prison gangs like the TS (San Antonio Express News 1989). At some point in the early 1990’s La Eme began terrorizing the barrios and menacing street gangs to cooperate or face consequences (Valdez 2005).

An intuitive assumption to make about the stark difference in modus operandi of the prison gang generation and previous barrio criminal organizations is “modernity”. That is, the differences in structure and level of brutality are simply generational or “period” effects; an “evolution” or devolution of the violent nature of gangs that escalated in the 1980’s nationwide. However, the generational divide between these two San Antonio-based genres in particular was not cleanly demarcated. The current study found that a significant number of members of 1950’s and 1960’s barrio youth gangs were affiliated with a prison gang some 25 to 30 years later. This fact calls for a more careful examination of the generational dynamics at play in the world of Chicano gangs over the last several decades. However, I first must entertain an alternate hypothesis that, while is devoid of sociological analysis, is one that is commonly heard on the streets of San Antonio by law enforcement and other detractors of la Eme.

Alternate Hypothesis

There is an alternate point of view about what led to the formation of la Eme in San Antonio. A contention that often surfaces among non-Mafia, and non-gang affiliated Chicanos in San Antonio, is that it is a “copycat” structure emulating the California Eme model, which originated over 20 years earlier than in Texas (Davidson 1974; Valdez & Enriquez 2011). While this viewpoint doesn’t exactly contradict my own thesis that the Carrasco model was an important example to follow for the Texas Eme in particular, it is a qualitatively different type of argument that is akin to a gang migration perspective.

Robert Morrill (2008) is a retired correctional officer and gang expert who worked in both California and Texas prison systems. His is the only known, written account of the emulation hypothesis. Although it is essentially a self-published product (by a non-refereed, local press in San Antonio), it is a plausible statement that documents its sources of information on the topic. Morrill claims that while incarcerated at the California state prison in Lompoc, the future (and current) president of the Texas Mexican Mafia, Heriberto “Herb” Huerta met with ranking officers of the California Eme to gain permission to begin an independent chapter in Texas (San Antonio). However, Morrill’s information comes from second hand accounts, thus its reliability is questionable and can only be proven by interviewing Huerta himself, who sits in a maximum security prison in Florence, Colorado.6

The Pre-Carrasco Era

My thesis that the Carrasco-era drug gangs were predecessors to the Texas Eme is based on a historical analysis of the barrio subculture over several decades and the implications of modernity conditions within an intensifying drug scene. While the relevant players (i.e. known drug dealers or “ruegas”) of the 1940’s and early ‘50’s were a rather finite, reputable group of individuals, rungs in the drug trafficking hierarchy quickly expanded in subsequent decades, with many lower and mid-level dealers emerging in the growing city. This appears to mark an age of modernity in barrio relations that is characterized by population increases, the proportionate growth of an expendable urban underclass, and the anonymity that accompanies these developments. In decades prior, the “universe” of drug dealers, gangsters, etc. was much smaller, maintaining semblance of “community” in the underworld, and perhaps inhibiting the type of reckless violence seen in the modern age.
If drug trafficking, substance abuse, and addiction were salient aspects of barrio life in the 1940’s and 1950’s, it was ever more prominent in the 1960’s and 70’s, propelling the state’s incarceration binge. The expansion of barrio conditions and populations into areas of the city that were new or previously uninhabited by Chicanos resulted in several shifts in networking dynamics. Just as the number of barrio gangs grew in this era, so did the number of drug users, user-dealers, and quasi-ruedas. Drug use was declared an epidemic by politicians like Price Daniel, a former Texas attorney general, and eventually, governor of the state from 1957 to 1963 (McKinney 1975). While he was a senator, his work on the Judiciary Committee resulted in recommendations on the problem of drug addiction and on changes to the Federal Criminal Code to address organized crime. These efforts trickled down to affect law enforcement policies and tactics in San Antonio to combat the issue.

For many 1950’s barrio youth, their street gang networks uniquely positioned them to engage in higher order barrio activities as young adults, especially of the illegal and quasi-legal sort. The broader project from which this paper is drawn documents the patchwork of late 1950’s drug dealers and the substratum of user-dealers that were well known in San Antonio, followed by the barrio gangs they ran with as youth. This illustrated the differences in barrio “wise-guy” network relations between the pre and post Carrasco eras. For brevity, I’ve omitted most of the detailed information that includes names of these players and their dense web of interconnections, instead summarizing these elements in the next two sections.

Quasi-Ruedas: The New Generation
According to police, in the late 1950’s, a younger, larger group of marijuana and heroin dealers began to replace a prior cohort of “kingpins” who had left town or were serving time in the penitentiary (San Antonio Express-News 1954; San Antonio Light 1958). A major roundup in October 1958 resulted from the issuance of 35 arrest warrants on 11 persons secretly indicted on narcotics charges. The average age of those arrested was 22 years (San Antonio Light 1958). Some of the young hustlers named in the roundup who continued on in drug trafficking after this bust were well-known barrio gang youth in the early and mid 1950’s in San Antonio.

There was a sizeable group operating in this timeframe who managed to go undetected by police for a longer period than those aggressive dealers identified and rounded up in this particular dragnet. Like the more prominent ruedas, all of these men were from different barrio groups in the inner west-side. In an estimated universe of about 1,300 to 1,500 male Chichano barrio gang youth in 1950’s San Antonio (see Tapia 2015), these men were among some of the more reputable user-dealers.

This group of individuals was slightly older than Fred Carrasco and preceded him in the realm of street-level narcotics sales. Naturally, a few from this milieu rose to become higher-level dealers, and some of these were recognized as such in The Heroin Merchant. One of these was Daniel “Dandy” Berlanga, of the Lake gang in the 1950’s, who played a major role in the de los Santos drug ring and later in Fred Carrasco’s group. Dandy had six brothers, five of whom were Lake gang members who supported his movement into the class of ruedas by assisting in street-level dissemination and sales. This bunch was allied with the man who is credited with bringing Fred Carrasco into the fold. This was Fred’s older cousin Jesse “El Chalape” Santoy, who also gets lots of coverage in McKinney’s book, but those who comprised the barrio network that distributed the large quantities he dealt in did not.

With regard to street-level operations, The Heroin Merchant sidesteps the importance of such barrio dwellers to the success of the higher-order drug operation that was highlighted. One example of this comes early in the book, regarding a bust involving El Chalape (Santoy) and his right hand, Berlanga. Although omitted by McKinney, involved in that bust were individuals that the current study recognizes as being associated with the Southside’s largest gang of the era, The Circle (San Antonio Light 1961). This implies that the Southside barrio gang structure was a key part of the heroin distribution and street sales for the ruedas.

The Growing City, The Growing Barrio
Between 1950 and 1960, the population of San Antonio (Bexar County) grew by 27 percent, from 500,460 to 687,151 and it grew by another 17 percent over the next decade (U.S. Census, 2015). A disproportionate amount of this growth was among the Chicanos in the population, which has steadily become a larger portion of the county’s residents over time (U.S. Census, 2014). As the socioeconomic status of this group remains stagnant at best (Grogger and Trejo 2002; Murdock et al. 2013) this amounts to barrio expansion during the era. This has direct implications for the size and number of barrio gangs that would emerge during this time. As discussed by Montejano (2010), there was an explosion of barrio gang activity in San Antonio after 1960. Until this point in the barrio’s history, proven, reputable barrio youth were a finite group, and as several interviewees for the current study commented, “everybody knew everybody”.

As the demand for drugs began to soar in the barrio, naturally, the number of kingpins and their organizations began to grow. McKinney (1975) noted by 1972, narcotics investigators accounted for nine separate drug trafficking rings in San Antonio with ties to Mexican suppliers. Some ten years prior, there were perhaps only five or six of these groups, including that of Melchizo de los Santos, The Georges Brothers, El Chalape, and a few other ruedas from the 1940’s and ‘50’s who were still in the business. Fred Carrasco’s drug ring would become by far the most successful and reputable of the San Antonio-based groups operating in the early 1970’s. It is this notoriety that elevated him to near-legendary status in San Antonio and the South-Texas region, thus my claim that founders of the Texas Eme and other
prison gangs from the region would want to emulate the group and its tactics.

**Barrio Gang Norms Over Time**

Given the regimented, organized, and hyper violent features of Texas prison gangs’ “business”, the question becomes, how much of a break from the norms of Chicano gangs of prior generations do they represent? As of the early 1990’s, prison gangs were perhaps most known for “collecting the dime”, i.e. a 10 percent street-tax on non-mafia drug dealers (Valdez 2005). Failure to pay the tax typically results, initially, with a verbal threat, a “calentado” (roughing-up), and/or if it occurs with a visit to the dealer’s home, may include the taking of the cash and drugs on-site. In traditional barrio street jargon, this is known as “hikando”, and in contemporaneous “gangsta” subculture as “getting jacked”. In the barrio, this practice goes back at least to the 1950’s, as told by this study’s older interviewees.

Were this form of non-compliance or other forms of disrespect to the prison gang to continue, the subject(s) may be seriously hurt or murdered. The murdering of a rival or a snitch was also certainly part of the subculture of the ruedas of the 1940’s and 50’s, but these were individualistic, sporadic incidents used in handling personal business. The difference in the modern prison gang era is the widespread and systematic nature with which these actions are carried out. I refer to these as “period effects”, i.e. an evolution or “sign of the times”, as the U.S. as a whole experienced a surge of gang activity and homicide beginning in the 1980’s (Bjerregaard and Lizotte 1995; Howell 1999).

In assessing changes in barrio violence norms over time, it is worth noting that for the members of 1950’s generation gangs who became involved with prison gangs as they approached middle age in the early 1980’s, not much difference seems to exist in their orientation towards the costs and methods of doing business. In this regard, perhaps prison gangs are best considered a selection mechanism for the most calculating, ruthless individuals within the Chicano criminal sub-class. There is evidence of this in the recruitment structure of these groups from street gangs and prison inmates (Tapia; 2013; Tapia et al. 2014).

Given prison gangs’ extortion of non-mafia members conducting business in the barrio, the current study also explored the relationship between the new mafia generation and “old-timers” who were still in business themselves when the mafia formed. On this topic, subject comments were overwhelmingly suggestive of a peaceful coexistence between the generations. In the mid-1980’s, the prison gang members and the 1950’s gangsters were only separated by about half a generation, or 10-20 years in age. Where it is not likely that seasoned, veteran criminals would be willing to pay the “dime” or succumb to other forms of intimidation by younger groups, this may have set the tone for the next 20 years or so. One subject commented that prison gangs “basically left these older guys alone porque no los podían gorrilar” (because they couldn’t bully them). They might say to themselves, hey these old guys are crazy, man” (laughs) (“Pilinga” Alazan-Apache barrio). Moreover, the leaders of these groups knew a lot of the older guys via family and network ties and mostly instructed their soldiers to lay off of them unless they were affiliated with a rival prison gang.

**Conclusion & Discussion**

The genesis of Latino prison gangs in Texas is an underexplored topic in the subfield of organized crime. It is important to understand how such “super gangs” form as a function of social networks in a locale, and the continuity of those networks in the face of social change. Although the Texas Eme did not formally emerge until the early to mid-1980’s, the current paper sought to trace their main influences back to the 1960’s Westside barrios of San Antonio. For this historical foray, the late 1960’s and early 1970’s mark the beginning of the “modern” age in barrio-based drug gang processes. In this regard, the “Carrasco era” marked an important chapter in South Texas’ modern drug smuggling history. Indeed, the violence and related drama that accompanied it on barrio streets and in Texas prisons represents a critical sea-change in the underworld politics that would govern those settings for the next several decades.

The South Texas region is easily one of the most active of the federal government’s High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HDTA) designations in the U.S. While such narcotics law enforcement operations now have Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO)’s, or cartels, to deal with in that picture, in the 1980’s and 1990’s, such efforts were primarily focused on barrio activities in the major cities. While ties to Mexican suppliers have always been part of the equation in barrio drug operations, law enforcement targets at that time were mainly prison gang members and their affiliates, who still remain a salient part of the drug distribution equation.

Analyzing the Carrasco era helps us to understand what seem like stark contrasts in the norms and politics of the drug trade in the barrio, going from the “old-school” norms of the 1940’s and 1950’s ruedas to that of the extreme and merciless tactics of modern prison gangs. I posit that the Carrasco era, and his organization in particular, provided a model for how the 1980’s-generation Texas prison gangs would conduct their business in and out of the prisons. Moreover, since policies in the sentencing of drug offenders became much stiffer in the 1970’s (Western 2006), the incarceration binge that followed provided an ample supply of potential recruits for these organizations, allowing for the most capable and fierce barrio criminals to run such groups.

This paper puts forth the thesis that the structure and violent nature of the most notable San Antonio-based prison gang (La Eme) was heavily influenced by the Fred Carrasco cross-national drug gang of the early 1970’s. Aside from the specific contextual barrio and prison roots he shared with the leaders of La Eme as a
contemporary criminal organization, he had a particular style of governance that corresponds to the prison gang's orientation. As Carrasco required his close operatives to take sworn oaths of allegiance to the group, so have mafia norms been structured. The level of brutality utilized by Carrasco to intimidate and co-opt competitors and to maintain discipline among his employees are also features of the Latino prison gangs to emerge in the 1980's in San Antonio and the region.

The current work builds around McKinney's (1975) "snapshot" of the Carrasco era by describing the substratum of dealers and users that supported the higher level operations of the group in San Antonio. Where McKinney's (1975) work on the Fred Carrasco drug ring was the first of its kind in documenting San Antonio Chicano barrio networks of the 1960's and 70's, it barely scratched the surface on this topic. To be fair, McKinney's work was not designed as a broader historical analysis, but simply to tell the tale of the barrio's most notorious modern villain, or folk hero, depending on the interpretation and viewpoint (Montejano 2010; Olguín 2010). The current work essentially finds that Carrasco (albeit unknowingly, due to his death in a failed prison breakout in 1975), is the symbolic godfather of the Texas Mexican Mafia, which is an alternate view from law-enforcement's take on the history of this development (Morrill 2008).

References


Tapia: Barrio Criminal Networks and Prison Gang Formation in Texas


Texas Department of Public Safety 2015. “Texas Gang Threat Assessment” Texas Fusion Center, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism Division: 1 – 57.


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**End Notes:**

1. Membership in most Latino prison gangs is widely considered to be a lifelong commitment and most operate via a “blood-in-blood-out” oath where a member who wishes to separate from the group may be marked for death.

2. McKinney was a San Antonio Express News staff writer and independent journalist.

3. Several local news stories profiling the research project generated subject referrals, requiring some screening by other subjects.

4. While research subjects acknowledge the role of prison gang involvement and advances in weapons and communication technology in changing the character of barrio gangs over time, they consider it a myth that their subculture was more innocuous than that of their modern counterparts. They claim that while they may not have had the formal structure of gangs in subsequent decades, their loyalties to the gang lifestyle were just as intense, and their street codes were just as well defined.

5. Bradshaw et al. (1998) noted a significant increase in male Chicano homicide rates after 1960, spatially clustered in the historically violent westside barrio.

6. This “fact” has appeared in various documents, to include newspaper articles (Contreras 2005) and U.S. Appeals Court Documents (U.S. v. Juan Victor Valles, 5th Circuit, April 2007). Yet, it is based on hearsay, perhaps originating from San Antonio Police Department Gang Unit Detective, and longtime Eme expert, Valentin Lopez, (now deceased), quoted in Contreras (2005). At the writing of this manuscript, this author awaits return correspondence from Huerta on this matter. He was also asked about the influence of the Fred Carrasco group on Eme formation. A known associate of both the Eme and the Texas Syndicate in San Antonio is rumored to have testified that Herb Huerta “brought the Eme from California to Texas” in a 1990 trial.
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"How to Implement a Gang Victim Assistance Program"
"Building Trust in Our Communities: Overcoming the Stop Snitching Gang Distrust Problem"
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Perceptions of Stigma, Internal Motivation, and Future Goals of Youth Participating in a Gang Tattoo Removal Program

by

Veronica M. Herrera and Yevgeniy Mayba

Abstract

Recognizing that visible tattoos serve as barriers to successful integration within school and the workplace, programs providing tattoo removal began appearing in the 1990s. Studies examining the efficacy of gang-affiliated tattoo removal suggest that such processes can help former gang members complete their integration into mainstream society. The present study examines 259 case files of youth participating in the Clean Slate Tattoo Removal Program. We examine the reasons youth have for acquiring and ultimately deciding to remove their visible tattoos, their future goals and steps they are taking towards their goals. We also examine participants’ perceptions regarding how others perceive their visible tattoos, as well as their perceptions about themselves. The participants reported a desire to achieve success through employment and education and disassociation with their previous lifestyles. Qualitative analyses of a subset of participants showed they were aware of the negative stigma associated with visible tattoos and believed that other people attributed internal negative characteristics to them. This assessment contrasted drastically with participants’ self-perceptions. Instead of internalizing the perceived negative labels, participants appeared to maintain positive self-images and desire to integrate into the mainstream society.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the persistence of public rhetoric on social inclusivity in the United States, there exist strong societal tendencies to label deviance as an outside force (Becker, 1963). Although deviance can take many different forms and varies in severity of societal response to it, certain negative labels associated with deviance can significantly impact the lives of individuals subjected to them. Individuals processed by the criminal justice system, for example, are labeled “criminals” and are forced to carry the burden of that stigma for life through the use of readily available public records and background checks (Murphy, Fuleihan, Richards, & Jones, 2011). Similar to the persistence and negative consequences of a criminal record, one’s association with gangs is also subject to negative stigmatization that affects the lives of gang members long after they desist from gang-affiliated