Modern Chicano Street Gangs: Ethnic Pride Versus “Gangsta” Subculture

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Abstract
This article examines the subcultural characteristics of modern Chicano street gangs, using San Antonio, Texas, as a case study. It is informed by archival material, police data, and multifaceted fieldwork with gang members and police in that city. The result is a broad sweeping analysis of the role of various social forces in shaping the form of contemporary Chicano gangs. I find that gang migration, the social mimicry of Black gangs, and the weakening of ethnic pride have all profoundly affected modern street gang subculture. However, ethnic pride norms have not completely faded away, presenting an interesting bifurcation among modern Chicano gangs. Profiling the most violent and reputable gangs from the early 1990s to 2015 in San Antonio drives this analysis of barrio longevity versus cultural succession. This study concludes that there are “period effects” that are not well accounted for in the current literature on youth gang subcultures.

Keywords
gangs, subculture, ethnicity, race, ethnic pride, Chicano

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Barrio gangs date at least as far back as the 1920s in most Mexican American (Chicano) communities in the United States (Bogardus, 1943; Vigil, 1988). Typically very ethnocentric, most modern manifestations of these groups have undergone an interesting hybridization that incorporates elements of Black “gangsta” subculture. This article juxtaposes the ethnocentric and hybridized types of modern Chicano gangs, giving consideration to the elements that shape each type. These discussions are centered on San Antonio, Texas, as the research site.

San Antonio has a rich history of barrio street gang activity dating to the 1920s (Casillas, 1994; Tapia, 2015, 2017; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). By the early 1990s, its youth gang problem had become one of the worst in the nation (Bolden, 2014; Duff, 1994; Sikes, 1997; Tripplett, 1997). As one of the largest collections of Mexican-origin populations in the United States, the city provides an ideal laboratory for conducting historical and contemporary research on such groups. Avelardo Valdez and coauthors (2000; 2005; 2007; 2009) have capitalized on this fact, becoming prolific scholars of modern Chicano gangs in San Antonio.

One especially useful framework for the current study is Valdez’s (2005) distinction between traditional and nontraditional Chicano households in San Antonio’s barrios. Nontraditional households are characterized by constant drug abuse and its collateral consequences of incarceration, female participation in sex work, welfare dependency, and so on (i.e., underclass characteristics). Traditional households are essentially the working- and middle-class Chicano families. It follows that if youth from traditional Chicano homes experiment with the street gang subculture, they are apt to belong to more benign groups, and are more likely to age out. These are the youth most likely to embrace the generic “gangsta” subculture that is widely available to America’s youth via mass media, rap music, and so on (e.g., Kubrin, 2005). Youth from nontraditional Chicano households are more likely to be part of hard-core, multigenerational Chicano gangs with links to adult criminal gangs. Whether a gang is constituted of hard-core underclass Chicano barrio values and mentality, or a modern “gangsta” one is, thus, not a trivial or happenstance matter.

The youth gang phenomenon that proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s across the United States was especially profound in San Antonio (Bolden, 2014; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005), where it was likened to being a “fad,” but with violent and often deadly consequences (Casillas, 1994; Sikes, 1997). An article in the Texas Monthly reported that many otherwise “mainstream” youth became swept up in the epidemic. That is, in addition to participation by genuine ghetto and barrio youth, many middle and high school athletes and “good” students developed a brief, but intense, interest in guns and gang
warfare (Duff, 1994). Gini Sikes (1997) also documented this widespread fascination with the gang life in wealthier areas of San Antonio, earning the city the informal title, “drive by capitol” of the United States. The peak rate of 126.2 drive by shootings per 100,000 people came in 1993 (San Antonio Police Department [SAPD], 2004).

The Scope of the Gang “Problem” Revisited

Defining gangs is a century-old debate in the United States (Ball & Decker 1995), and while the law enforcement definition is functional for statutory and prosecutorial purposes, it has oversimplified the matter for documentation purposes on the street, leading to net widening of the “gang problem.” The modern, codified definition of a gang used by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States is typically some variant of the following: “three or more persons who identify by a name, color, or symbol, and who organize for delinquent or criminal activity” (Barrows & Huff, 2009, p. 684; National Gang Information Center 2016, p. 4). In any given time period, the intensity and longevity of most of the groups in the San Antonio police gang database is not impressive, which is the case with most police databases in large cities (Kennedy, 2009). The literature has characterized this phenomenon as “wan-nabe” or relatively benign groups that embrace the norms that glorify “gangsta” subculture in the media (e.g., Klein, 1995; Kubrin, 2005; Spergel, 1990).

One of the more interesting exercises for me in studying San Antonio gangs was to periodically examine a list of all gang names in the SAPD database. This was often done as an in-class exercise with my students at UT-San Antonio to consider the potential frivolity of the “gang problem” and how error prone the process of documentation is. In 2015, the gang list contained about 300 delinquent and criminal groups of all sorts to include tagging (graffiti) crews, party crews, street gangs, prison gangs, and motorcycle gangs. In various individual years from the mid-1990s to 2007, these numbered near 1,000. Yet, the large number of group names in the database over the years is driven as much by police protocol for identifying gangs and other organizational facets of the police department as it is by the amount of delinquent and criminal subculture in the city.

The literature on the counting of gangs and gang members clearly shows that it is an inexact process, at best (Ball & Decker 1995; Curry & Decker, 1997; Esbensen, Thomas, Jr. Ni, & Taylor, 2001; Jacobs, 2009; Kennedy, 2009). The broader research project from which this article is extracted (described in “Data and Method” section) showed wildly divergent estimates of San Antonio’s youth gang prevalence reported by the press, the police, and intervention specialists in the 1950s. This illustrated
that the scope of “the gang problem” has been a poorly understood and politicized issue for decades. As secretive, dynamic groups, a particular gang’s structure and activities are difficult to confirm or measure, and, therefore, prevalence estimates of gangs in a given place are prone to vary widely. It does not appear that this process of estimating gang activity has gotten much better in recent decades either.

Within 3 years of its formation in 1991, the SAPD gang unit had identified 300 gangs citywide, 100 of which were considered serious (Duff, 1994). By 1995, the number of gangs had more than doubled to 797 (Tripplett, 1997), and by 2007, the number nearly doubled again to 1,443 (SAPD, 2007). Ironically, violent gang crime was on the drastic decline during these years (SAPD, 2004). By contrast, in his extensive data collection effort on hard-core Chicano gang members in San Antonio throughout the mid- and late 1990s, Avelardo Valdez (2005) reported there were 26 serious turf gangs in the Chicano-dominant sectors of the city (west and south sides). Thus, the script had flipped from the 1950s and 1960s where gang researchers discovered far more gangs than city government agencies were willing to admit existed. Sikes (1997) wrote that this occurred sometime in the late 1980s when federal grant funds to combat gang activity became available, prompting San Antonio to finally admit to its gang problem.

San Antonio’s Serious Gangs and the Migration Question

Of the five most serious gangs in San Antonio identified by the local gang unit in the mid-1990s, four were Chicano and one was Black (Tripplett, 1997). The West Side Varrio Kings (WSVK) and their younger cohort, the Big Time Kings (BTKs), were the largest groups in the city, with about 1,000 members between them. The other two Chicano groups were the Ambrose, and the “2-6,” both well-known Chicago-based gangs. In theory, these gangs were satellite groups of a larger gang with distant origins, which provides an interesting foray into a long-standing debate on the spread of modern gang subculture and structure.

When a local street gang adopts the name of a “nation” such as the Crips, the Bloods, or in this case, the Latin Kings, Ambrose, and 2-6, the implication is that they are a “set” of the larger gang. Whether such claims are true is a topic that has been debated in the street gang literature for several decades (e.g., Hagedorn, 1988; Maxson, 1993). The most authoritative voices on the gang migration topic once found little support for its role in the spread of gangs over long distances (Maxson, Woods, & Klein, 1996; Waldorf, 1993), but others have since found that it is a significant cause of such gang
proliferation, particularly in places with newly emerging gang problems (Knox et al., 1996; Moreno, 2006; Tapia, 2014; Yearwood & Rhyne, 2007). The story of modern gang proliferation in San Antonio embodies this mixed set of findings on gang migration.

Historically, Chicago’s gang culture has had an enormous impact on that of San Antonio’s. The Latin Kings had become so popular and so large in Chicago that by the 1960s, even Mexican American boys from San Antonio visiting or living with family members there had joined the gang (Tapia, 2017). There was even a 1960s barrio gang in San Antonio’s westside named “El Chicago” (Montejano, 2010). Although such gang connections between the two cities are logical, given the normative migration stream of Chicano families between them, it became most evident in San Antonio in the 1980s and 1990s. According to a list of active gangs kept by the SAPD gang unit, the BTKs and the WSVK were two of at least 28 different Kings sets throughout the city in the 1990s. On the surface, the suggestion is that they are part of the Almighty Latin King and Queen (ALKQ) nation, which was originally a Puerto Rican gang formed in Chicago in the 1940s, and still headquartered there (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

Despite the impression its founders may have intended to give, San Antonio–based Kings sets have never convincingly had strong ties to the ALKQ nation in Chicago. If there once were direct ties, local groups quickly distinguished themselves from them. San Antonio–based Kings are never referred to as “Latin” Kings, for example, but did and continue to use lots of the group’s folklore, signs, colors, and so on (i.e., that of the “people” nation). Although formal gang ties of the local Kings sets to Latin Kings in Chicago are dubious, the network connection of local Ambrose and 2-6 sets to Chicago are thought to be real (J. Dyer, personal communication, May 12, 2015). Despite these mixed findings on the role of actual gang migration/expansion, it is clear that the subcultural elements did migrate, having a big influence on the formation of San Antonio gangs.

**Ethnicity and Modern Chicano Street Gang Subculture**

Early theories of gang formation posit that its members are often social misfits (Cohen, 1955; Short & Strodtebeck, 1965). Poverty is a strong selection mechanism for gang membership (Eitle, Grunkel, & Grundy, 2004; Greene & Pranis, 2007; Klein, 1995), and it is well known that U.S. race-ethnic minorities are disproportionately poor. In most American cities, Black and Latino youth are true numeric minorities. Thus, it follows that street gang formation in such places would embrace ethnic identity, as seen with Midwestern
groups such as the Latin Kings, the Latin Counts, and Spanish Cobras, which formed in the 1940s and 1950s, for example. Where Chicano gang emergence is often linked to the social dislocation that can result from poverty and discrimination (Bogardus, 1943; Duran, 2012; Mirande, 1987; Montejano, 2010; Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988), it is intuitive that these groups would organize on the basis of ethnicity and social class. They may even look to their poor, ethnic minority status as a form of resistance and pride (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). This process is salient even in “majority-minority” cities like San Antonio, where Latinos comprise well more than 60% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Although there are elements of ethnic pride embedded in modern Chicano street gang subculture, the role of ethnicity in shaping the subculture in the urban Southwest is rife with contradiction. Gang unit officers and other keen observers of these groups will readily agree that the street gang proliferation era ushered in a generic “gangsta” subculture that quickly became the dominant mind-set among gang youth. Many street-oriented young Chicanos began to mimic Black street subcultures in terms of language use, music preference, and gang structure by adopting the “nation” frameworks of the Crips and the Bloods (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996) or of the Folk and People nations (Hagedorn, 1988). This is evident in the data for San Antonio and would hold true for Latino gangs in any Texas city with street gangs.

**Data and Method**

This article is extracted from a larger research project on the barrio gangs and criminal networks of San Antonio, Texas, in a historical perspective (see Tapia, 2015, 2017). 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. A wide range of qualitative data to include archival material, police gang database information, personal interviews with police and gang members inform the work, and both structured and semi-structured fieldwork over a 20-year span. This comes by virtue of the author’s embeddedness in the community, first as a college student and Chicano activist from 1992 to 1996, then as a gang intervention social worker from 1997 to 2000, and finally, as a faculty member at a local university from 2003 to 2015. For most of the author’s 20-year residence in San Antonio, a sharp focus was maintained on Chicano gang issues, by personal association, by employment duties, and finally in an independent research capacity. These experiences and resources were used to yield an
inventory of the most serious Chicano gangs from the 1990s to 2015 to examine their general structure and subcultural characteristics relative to ethnic pride and hybridization.

Gang data are notoriously difficult to generate and for researchers to obtain. If police departments collect them at all, it is not a requirement of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Uniform Crime Report data, for example. Therefore, it is at an agency’s discretion whether or not to collect them and where they are collected, they are usually well protected from the public, or carefully (and often strategically) put out in press releases. Researchers must have good professional contacts or submit freedom of information requests to obtain crude or (where it exists) detailed gang data. The gang data used here came via the relationships fostered with various gang officers of the SAPD, school district police, and the Bexar County Juvenile Probation Department over time. Aside from the various qualitative vignettes appearing throughout this article, the gang inventory and a descriptive analysis of its contents are the primary data analyzed.

**Serious Gangs Inventory**

By the 1990s, poverty, semi- and fully automatic gun availability, and gangster subculture in San Antonio had become extremely widespread. Table 1 lists what were found to be the most reputable modern Chicano gangs (aside from those already discussed above). They are grouped by time periods of activity and longevity, also by indicating which street gangs had or have prison gang ties. These assessments are based on a gang’s overall reputation, SAPD gang database information, gang member and police interviews occurring over the extended time frame described above, and in some cases, visual inspection of graffiti in the gang’s known turf. Differences between my fieldwork information and that originating from law enforcement databases regarding the active status of a gang are potential sources of error. Changes in gang names, resulting from the gangs’ preferences or external pressures on new cohorts to change names, also potentially contribute to minor errors in the list.

**Findings**

Ethnic pride is evident in the gang names attached to only about one third of the antisocial groups listed below. The reality of modern gang subculture in San Antonio is that most Chicano gangs mimic Black gang subculture. In fact, because they far outnumber Black youth in San Antonio, there are more Chicano youth claiming membership in Crip and Blood sets (African
Table 1. San Antonio’s Most Notorious Chicano Street Gangs 1990s to 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Gangs</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| a. 1950s gangs that are or were recently still active | Varrio Gray Eagle (VGE)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Puro Varrio Kenwood<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Victoria Courts Gangsters (VCG)/The Fellas<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Rock Quarry (RQ)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Varrio La Blanca (VLB)<sup>†</sup>  
                                      Varrio Gray Eagle (VGE)<sup>†</sup>  
                                      Puro Varrio Kenwood<sup>†</sup>  
                                      Puro Violent Players  
                                      Puro Brown  
                                      Midnite Colors  
                                      Bloodstone Villains (Mixed Race)  
                                      Rivas Street Kings (RSK)  
                                      Puro Brown  
                                      2-6  
                                      Puro Violent Players  
                                      The Wrecking Crew  
                                      Insane Chicano Gangsters (ICG)  
                                      Suerlio Trece (SUR-13)  
                                      a. 1950s gangs that are or were recently still active|
| b. Active through 2012-2015 | Brownleaf Posse (BLP)  
                                      Fearless Brown Soldiers  
                                      Chicano Azteca Mob  
                                      Authorized to Kill (A2K)<sup>†</sup>  
                                      SA Browns  
                                      Victoria Courts Gangsters (VCG)/The Fellas  
                                      The Wrecking Crew  
                                      Lincoln Court Kings (LCK)  
                                      Suerlio Trece (SUR-13)  
                                      a. 1950s gangs that are or were recently still active|
| c. Active through 2005 | The Capping Krew  
                                      Kings of Perfection (KOP)  
                                      the KIN  
                                      Tommy Boy Players  
                                      Brownleaf Posse (BLP)  
                                      The Wrecking Crew  
                                      Timberhill Kings  
                                      True Players  
                                      Suicidal Locos  
                                      Aquatic Larcenies  
                                      True Players  
                                      Puro Violent Players  
                                      Insane Chicano Gangsters (ICG)  
                                      Suerlio Trece (SUR-13)  
                                      a. 1950s gangs that are or were recently still active|
| d. 1990s only | Westside Mirasol Thugs  
                                      Suicidal Force (SF)  
                                      Mexican Posse  
                                      Suicidal Force (SF)  
                                      Timberhill Kings  
                                      True Players  
                                      Westside Posse  
                                      Suicidal Force (SF)  
                                      a. 1950s gangs that are or were recently still active|
| e. Other notable groups with varying life spans | Aztec Mob<sup>a</sup>  
                                      One Big Familia (OBF)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Latino Party Crew (LPC)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Bud Smokers Only (BSO)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Los Azteca Kings<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Rainbow Hills Rowdies<sup>b</sup>  
                                      San Eduardo Thugs (a.k.a. “SET Crew”)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Always Violent/Vandalizing Unit (AVU)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Evil Blunting Assholes/Evil Bloodied Assassins (EBA)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Altadena Block Crips (Southwest Set)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Dark/Dope Minded Kriminals/Down Ass Latinos/Kriminals<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Aztec Mob<sup>a</sup>  
                                      One Big Familia (OBF)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Latino Party Crew (LPC)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Bud Smokers Only (BSO)<sup>a</sup>  
                                      Los Azteca Kings<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Rainbow Hills Rowdies<sup>b</sup>  
                                      San Eduardo Thugs (a.k.a. “SET Crew”)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Always Violent/Vandalizing Unit (AVU)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Evil Blunting Assholes/Evil Bloodied Assassins (EBA)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Altadena Block Crips (Southwest Set)<sup>b</sup>  
                                      Dark/Dope Minded Kriminals/Down Ass Latinos/Kriminals<sup>b</sup>  
                                      a. 1950s gangs that are or were recently still active|

<sup>a</sup>Gang still exists.  
<sup>†</sup>Active through ca. 2005.  
<sup>‡</sup>Dissipated in the 1990s.  
<sup>§</sup>Has prison gang ties.  
<sup>‡</sup>This group was a California transplant.

American gangs with West Coast origins), than there are Black youth claiming those sets. On the East side, ghetto areas especially, there are a number of Blood and Crip sets that are/were of mixed race (e.g., Drug Overthrowing Gangsters, Grape St. Watts [Crips], Northwest Crips), and in the barrios, there are/were a number of all-Chicano Blood and Crip sets. Some of the most notable in Table 1 include the Bloodstone Villains, Original Crip Gangsters (OCGs), Southbound Gangsters (Bloods), La Raza Bloods, Latino Crips, Altabana Block Crips (Southwest Set), Indian Creek Gangsters (Crips), and Southside Crips.
This development is one of the major subcultural changes identified by elderly research subjects in the broader study from which this article was extracted. The 1950s generation of barrio gang members interviewed in that larger study expressed much resentment for the fact that today’s barrio youth “are out of touch with their history and cultura . . .” The inability of many of today’s gang youth to speak Spanish or even use the Chicano street slang of the barrio is viewed by the past generation as a travesty. That the youth adopt the ways and culture of another racial group, and one with whom the gang youth of the older generations experienced much friction, is frowned upon by a prior generation of barrio gang members. This is a subtheme in the next section’s narrative that “respect has been lost,” because not only have the basic cultural markers (language) diminished but so too have the norms that once governed barrio rivalries.

Honoring Traditions and Hybrid Formations

In this case study, the network structure of the barrio’s delinquent groups seems to have changed due to outside influences, both geographic and cultural. Yet, despite the heavy influence of Black and Puerto Rican youth gang structures and cultures on Chicanos in San Antonio and the Southwest, there is still evidence of efforts to honor long-standing traditions in local barrio gang history. The youth who embody ethnic pride in their gang name and norms seem to represent a distinct type of modern San Antonio barrio gangster. Whether their gang name is an ethnocentric one such as “Chicanos Taking Over,” or one that is tied to a distinct micro-locality, such as the “Rivas Street Kings,” the implication is that their barrios “stand for something” larger than themselves, as is the Chicano barrio tradition. These gangs, especially the ones tied to a street name or locality, are perhaps the closest thing we have in modern day to those archetypal barrio street corner groups of a bygone era. Ethnocentricity in a modern Chicano gang name suggests that the group has a political conscience that is influenced by older members of their families. This also resembles the value system of the 1950s generation of San Antonio Chicano gangsters (Tapia, 2015).

Whether Chicano youth still form or sustain street corner societies is a point of disagreement among elder research subjects, current youth gang unit officers, current street gang members, and social commentators from other Southwestern Chicano gang locales. The elders interviewed for this study insisted that modern gangs do not, in any way, resemble the turf gangs they formed in the 1950s. Seasoned gang officers refute this view, stating “sure there are still plenty of places where if a rival gang member gets caught in the wrong turf area, they will get badly hurt or shot” (A. Castañola, personal communication, March 18,
2015). This was also the view of most of the Chicano gang youth in San Antonio whom I interviewed about the topic in 2015.

Los Angeles–based journalist, Sam Quinones (2014), wrote a piece for the *Pacific Standard* called “The End of Gangs,” in which he compellingly argues that street gangs have disappeared from public view in Southern California. Here, the importance of studying Texas’ Chicano street gangs apart from those in California is illustrated, but one must admit that Quinones’ observations of old barrio gang hangouts now being clear of open congregating is becoming more of the norm throughout the Southwest. He notes that gentrification of inner city street corner gang hangouts, and nongang families again enjoying public parks, represents the end of gangs, as we once knew them. Indeed, implied in Quinones’ thesis is that we are in a post street gang era that is largely driven by the use of communication technology, making it less necessary to engage in public loitering to conduct gang business.

**Ethnic Hybridization**

The serious, modern Chicano street gangs that mimic Black gangs are an interesting hybrid to study. They emerge from some mechanism or combination of forces that appear to be partly steeped in local Chicano tradition. In the case of these Black-influenced Chicano gangs named earlier (e.g., Bloodstone Villains, Grape Street Watts), their raison d’être, whether it be about drug profits, armed robberies, attacking rivals, or whatever the solidarity-forming activities of the group are, they build hyperviolent traditions of their own, perhaps because they have to compete with the serious Black gangs on the east side (e.g., The East Terrace Gangsters or the Wheatley Court Gangsters). Youth who went this way were often simply more likely to have grown up in the Black Eastside, which now experiences ever more succession of Blacks by Mexicans and Chicanos and some racial tension as a result (Cancino, Martinez, & Stowell, 2009).

Although these eastside Chicano youth were influenced by the culture and value systems of the poor Black youth in their midst, their older relatives are often members of Latino adult prison gangs. By contrast, groups that mimic the Black subculture but who do not have such a background to compete with Black gangs can only be simply understood as temporary, superficial formations with little history and low odds of a future as an organized group (see Yablonski’s, 1959, classical definition of such gang formations as “near groups”). In Texas, these are phenomenological urban formations whose members will likely join a larger, citywide federation with lax rules called the *Tango* (see Tapia, Sparks, & Miller, 2014) once they land in adult county jail for the first time after reaching the age of 17. Such groups are closely related
to other more benign hybrid formations that always threaten to become “the real thing.”

**Violence Norms**

Some of the changing norms in San Antonio barrio gangs over time included reckless, over-the-top violence in episodes of street gang conflict. My contention here is that modern Chicano gangs mimic not only the Black gangs’ style, customs, music, and speech but also their methods and patterns of violence. In the general population, Latinos are far less violent than Blacks, showing levels that are rarely much higher than that of Whites (Martinez, 2014), and often even lower (e.g., Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). Elevated levels of violence are pathological in any community, but especially where they are traditionally low. There is, thus, tension between the community’s old value systems of “respect for the barrio,” on the one hand, and the need to one-up an enemy, to be daring, and to get a reputation for committing *loco*, violent acts on the other (see Valdez, Kaplan, & Codina, 2000). Although this has always been the case in the barrio, the scale and the weaponry of the modern age make it qualitatively different than in the past. Importation of the hyperviolent subculture via migration from Chicago and influence from the Black (the United States’ dominant) gang subculture seem to drive these effects for Chicanos.  

Despite this shift, as a long-standing subculture in the community, there are also many strains of cultural preservation evidenced in today’s San Antonio Chicano gangs. Modern groups express ethnic pride and rally around it as shown in a portion of the street gang names listed in Table 1 and in the ethnic-based gangs formed in correctional facilities. There are also conscious attempts by gang leaders to honor older barrio traditions and norms. For example, to the extent that prison and street gang operations are reciprocal in nature (Mirande, 1987; Valdez, Alice, & Kaplan, 2009; Valdez & Enriquez, 2011), there is regulation of street violence by prison gangs (Morrill, 2007). These actions derive from the founding philosophy of most Chicano prison gangs, who view themselves as warriors for *la raza*, a people downtrodden by the dominant Anglo system in the United States. Prison gang members indoctrinate younger members of their families into this belief system and important links are formed across the generations (Mirande, 1987; Moore, 1978; Morrill, 2007; Valdez & Enriquez, 2011).

**The Gangsta Subculture**

Martinez (2014) points to the nationwide appeal of the informal, but booming, crack cocaine market of the 1980s to ghetto and barrio youth. Its
quick, lucrative profits represented a rational choice adjustment to shifts in the economy that left many of these youth few options for legitimate, gainful employment, and it was a central part of the gangsta image they craved. In today’s barrios, ghettos, and even in White poverty contexts, modern gang norms, subculture, and behaviors most often embody a generic “ghetto gangsta” culture that transcends race and ethnicity. Perhaps due to media effects, Black, White, Latino, Native American, and to some extent, even Asian street gang members of today all seem to have embraced the dominant underclass cultural norms of the ghetto.

The latest factor exacerbating these developments in street culture is the widespread access that even this class of individuals has to the high-tech gadgets used in online social networking. These have increased connectivity with similar others and provide ready access to online entertainment and information that feeds into the underclass “gangsta” subculture (Sweeney, 2015). It is one that glorifies gang rivalry, violence, drug dealing, machismo, smoking “blunts” to remain high all day, and using the slang vernacular of the Black ghetto, replete with its particular dialect. In short, it is heavily influenced by the images and messages of gangsta rap music, which became popular in the 1980s (Kubrin, 2005). Whatever core theories one may use to describe the rapid escalation of underclass street crime in the modern age, there clearly are period effects that are not well accounted for in the current literature on street youth gang subculture. One might simply refer to these as the effects of “modernity” where poverty subcultures are strongly conditioned by race-ethnicity and criminal subcultures.

**Ethnocentrism in Chicano Barrio Gangs**

Although the gangsta subculture that overtook America’s underclass youth populations remains the dominant trope, in the barrio, ethnicity still plays a convincing role in determining the particular form of a gang’s identity. Based on the Chicano gang inventory in Table 1, it is still clearly a key factor in shaping gang intensity, longevity, structure, and networks. An interesting development for Valdez’s (2005) traditional/nontraditional framework for San Antonio is the new hybrid generation called Tango Orejon (see Tapia et al., 2014, for the group’s history). This group of youth, approximately aged 17 to 25, has one foot in the street-based “gangsta” subculture, and due to their historical affiliation as a recruitment pool for a Texas Latino prison gang, one in the hard-core underclass (i.e., “nontraditional”) Chicano subculture that Valdez (2005) described.

The Tangos’ split from the prison gang hierarchy is in large part due to the modern “gangsta” codes they follow versus old-school Chicano gang codes.9
Texas’ Tango hybrid gangs are reckless groups who shirk the established order and hierarchy, which once provided respect to prison gang leaders and members. The Tangos’ “power in numbers” approach to engaging in conflict with prison gangs requires that they recruit all types of underclass youth, even Black and White youth who are part of the generic “gangsta” generation. Perhaps only its leaders and “O.G.’s” in the 30 to 40 age group have deeper roots in San Antonio’s long-standing Chicano gang subculture, but most Tango members are relatively new to the game (i.e., first-generation gangstas). Chicano youth belonging to more stable, multigenerational gangs are more likely, for family and other values-based reasons, to still gravitate toward the traditional prison gang hierarchy.

**Latino Underclass in the Southwest**

In a final consideration of the cultural changes in San Antonio’s Chicano gang subculture over time, I borrow from the underclass perspective that corresponds to this study’s timeline. The underclass characteristics of poor Latino neighborhoods in Texas are culturally and behaviorally similar to those of Blacks and Latinos in other U.S. regions; yet, their onset was dictated by unique structural economic forces. Nestor Rodriguez (1993) wrote that the constant in-migration of Mexicans to large Southwestern cities such as Houston makes their poverty experience different from that of poor populations in other U.S. regions. He noted that Latino immigrants tended to harmoniously mix into established Chicano communities in the Southwest, which we now know dilutes the effects of violence and other negative outcomes associated with concentrated poverty (Martinez, 2014). Valdez (1993) made a similar assessment for the border town of Laredo, Texas, only 2 hours south of San Antonio.

For Houston, and especially in Laredo, poor Latinos adjusted to high community-level rates of poverty by relying more on the informal economy, namely, on the drug trade, which is abundant in this region (Valdez, 1993). Although the drug addiction, sex work, criminal activity, and welfare dependency that is normally associated with underclass subculture is present in all U.S. regions, drug trafficking and drug availability are more abundant in the Southwest. This remains an important distinction from the Midwestern underclass scenario.

San Antonio is not only geographically positioned between Houston and Laredo (the two Texas cities discussed above) but also represents a mix of the economies of both, and it is the midway point in the drug trafficking route between the two places. Although more specific structural causes of historical barrio violence in San Antonio are handled elsewhere (see Martinez,
2014), broad sweeping policies such as the "war on drugs" (Chambliss, 1994), “the incarceration binge” (Western, 2006), and the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Fabelo et al. 2011) also contributed to the embracing of underclass norms by the Southwestern region’s gang youth.

These policies are shown to have disproportionately ensnared young, poor, minority males into the juvenile and criminal justice systems, further limiting their chances of success in life. For many, this helps to cement their fate as members of the underclass. Previous generations too had to deal with similar forms of discrimination, both the daily, interpersonal types and structural (policy oriented) ones, but for the latter, perhaps not on the same scale that modern Chicano youth do. As the underclass concept is also based on multiple generations of abject poverty and isolation from mainstream forms of social capital, perhaps the current generation has been hit the hardest by structural forces.

**Summary and Discussion**

This study profiled modern Chicano street gangs in San Antonio and their place in the broader historical timeline of the urban barrio gang phenomenon. It first illustrated what we know about the prevalence of these formations and how it became a local youth epidemic. In this regard, our “knowledge” of barrio gangs, while better now than ever before, is still quite elusive. The police lens provides useful information about their prevalence and intensity, but its data systems are not very reliable. Different law enforcement and supervision agencies seem to address different parts of the issue. Here, I am in agreement with Curry (2000) that law enforcement information greatly overlaps with, but does not fully match the academic research findings on these groups.

Documenting the most reputable Chicano gangs in modern-day San Antonio served to illustrate several facets of the subculture, address barrio longevity, and examine the process of continuity. Table 1 showed there are five barrio gangs that date back to the 1950s that were still recently active in San Antonio, evidencing some 50 to 60 years of continuity. The salience of ethnocentricity in many of the modern gang names also pointed to the continued importance of ethnic pride in shaping gang identity, and the intergenerational tension seen between groups espousing a “gangsta” identity over Chicano pride. Finally, the links between Chicano street and prison gangs are touched upon, showing which San Antonio groups were known to be fully co-opted by the adult gangs. The tie between the street and prison gangs is far understated here, however. Street gangs are a training ground of sorts for the prison gangs to recruit from, mainly on an individual basis, by the youths’ reputation, family ties, and so on. With few
exceptions, however (e.g., Valdez, 2005; Valdez et al., 2009), the links between Chicano street and prison gangs, as pointed out so long ago (Mirande, 1987), are still not well understood.

On the topic of Chicano gang “modernity,” the importation of well-organized gang “nation” structures from Chicago and Los Angeles served to make the 1990s version of the phenomenon a popular “craze” in San Antonio. This disrupted the traditional barrio gang network structure, its cultural norms, and escalated gang violence to an unprecedented level. As with adult prison gangs, this level of violence shocks the sensibility of a Chicano community that has historically had lower levels of lethal violence citywide (Martinez, 2014), and the behavior is, therefore, not sustainable. A networks hypothesis can be offered here, where the size of the gang universe starts to matter. The sheer prevalence of participation and the widespread access to weapons, driven by the compelling influence of “gangsta rap” on impressionable youth are aspects of modernity that helped to transform the Chicano barrio gang subculture into a genuine social problem. Prior to the introduction of these elements, the subculture was less intense, less prevalent, and not equipped with the same “tools” as modern youth to drive the citywide violence rate up to such an alarming level in the 1990s.

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Notes
1. It is not clear to this author where and when this informal title originated, but it is the most common phrase uttered in popular or professional discussions of youth gang violence in San Antonio. It has even been used to justify the need for federal funds for youth gang intervention granted to the city by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in 1996. Bolden (2014) also alludes to this reputation in a similar context.

2. The Big Time Kings’ (BTKs) most formidable enemies in San Antonio all adopted Chicago-based “Folk” nation structure, the natural enemies of “People” nation.

3. There was a genuine Latin Kings gang in San Antonio with direct ties to those in Chicago, but they were a small group of Puerto Ricans, distinct from the 1,000+ Kings members of various homegrown San Antonio sets.
4. A group of 20 core Ambrose members were said to have migrated to San Antonio and established the gang in the early 1990s, but thereafter, the group splintered into various factions due to infighting. The larger group eventually reunited and had violent conflicts with prison gangs over drug tax street politics in the early 2000s.

5. Obtained from data entry personnel and data analysts at SAPD in 1997, 2000, 2006, 2007, and 2014. Other, area-specific lists were obtained from gang officers in area school districts. Still, other database information was obtained from the author’s employment in a federally funded youth gang intervention project in San Antonio from 1997 to 2000. Finally, the Bexar County Juvenile Probation Gang Unit and members of the Texas Gang Investigator’s Association were always forthcoming with any of the author’s data requests.

6. The latter method is not as reliable as it once was, due to changes in subcultural norms and the role of technology in gang cohesiveness. Today, younger members rely more on cell phones and online social networking to communicate than on regular, neighborhood-based face-to-face interaction.

7. For example, for a short time, a prison gang forced Varrio La Blanca (VLB) to dissipate or at least drop their name. The group then adopted “Westside Posse” (WSP), which stuck, because when VLB reclaimed their name during the war with the prison gang, WSP was retained by the younger cohort.

8. Kubrin (2005) also points out how “crazy,” unpredictably violent behavior is also valued by the ghetto’s “gangsta” subculture.

9. This is an ethnocentric, group loyalty–based set of values that, for the last three decades in Texas, relies on a paramilitary hierarchy for its group structure.

References


**Author Biography**

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