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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive study used Agnew's general strain theory of crime and delinquency as lens through which to interpret the recent developments of juvenile gangs and gang-related activities in Houston, Texas. Agnew strain theory's main prepositions describe: 1) an inability to achieve goals that are valued positively, 2) an absence of positive goals, and 3) a presence of negativity or crime. These were assessed in terms of applicability to joining gangs in Houston. Data were collected by unstructured interviews of city employees who respond to Houston's gangs (e.g., Mayor' Anti-Gang Office staff and Houston Police Department officers), area observations, and a review of city and police documents regarding gang activity in Houston. There appeared to be support for Agnew's assertion that strain precedes much juvenile delinquency.

Misconceptions and outdated information shape much of people's perception of juvenile gangs. Rightly, juvenile gangs remain a significant concern as gang members are more delinquent than non-gang members. The United States experienced tremendous growth in juvenile gangs in the 1980s and 1990s as the number of gang members in cities and jurisdictions with gang-related problems increased from 286 to about 4,800 (National Youth Gang Center, 1999). More recent gang developments are unclear and largely limited to media stories. This qualitative study is an attempt at updating the knowledge on juvenile gangs, specifically, in the United States' fourth largest city, Houston, Texas.

Gang activity appears to be increasing. The National Gang Threat Assessment (NGTA) (2009) indicated that in 2005 there were 790,000 gang members with 26,000 gangs. By 2009, gang members had increased to 900,000. The report also stated that gangs were responsible for a great number of crimes committed in many urban and suburban communities across the United States. Gang members engage in different activities such as theft, assault, alien smuggling, burglary, drive-by shootings, extortion, firearm offenses, home invasion robberies, homicide, identity theft, weapons trafficking, to name a few. Additionally, the NGTA (2009) revealed that in 2004 45% of US gangs were involved in drug distribution, but in 2008 the survey revealed that 58% were involved. Some of the most concerning crimes for police remain gang-related homicides.

The National Youth Gang Survey by the National Youth Gang Center (2001) revealed that there were 1,423 gang-related homicides in 639 law enforcement

jurisdictions. The problem appeared to be heavily concentrated in the largest cities and increasing, according to numerous media reports from 2007 to 2009, especially, in Texas cities with a large Hispanic population such as Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, El Paso and Laredo. In some of these cases, juvenile gang members or teenage death squads (Laredo, Texas - Mexican drug cartels using teenage death squads in America, 2009) were believed to be the perpetrators. Therefore, these compounding factors emphasize the significance of exploring the issue of gangs.

Juvenile gang members are individuals who are under the age of 18 or individuals who are below the age limit set by their state as the legal age of majority. They also identify themselves as gang members and have engaged in criminal activities as a result of their gang affiliation. The Texas Penal Code § 71.01 (2009) has defined the term gang as three or more people engaged in criminal activity.

An impediment in comprehending the development of gangs is the direct and, or indirect impact of poverty as opposed to various stressors of youth. Agnew's (1992) general strain theory of crime and delinquency expanded the notion of strain by assessing crime and delinquency as substitutes for the different strains encountered by youths. Agnew explained that the desire to commit deviant acts stemmed from three primary factors, which were the inability to achieve goals that were valued positively, the absence of positive goals, and the presence of negativity or crime. These strain elements are directly applicable to gangs as the reasons youths become affiliated with gangs as gang proliferation can be linked to stress and a lack of positive opportunities. Thus, this study examined recent developments in juvenile gang membership in Houston as possibly attributable to strain as described by Agnew.

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The research questions are: 1) How problematic is the juvenile gang situation in Houston? a) Is it increasing? b) Are the gangs violent? c) How widespread are they? d) How do they affect communities? e) Are female gang members more likely to be auxiliaries of male gangs or more independent? 2) How applicable is Agnew's general strain theory of crime and delinquency to the recent developments of juvenile gangs in Houston? a) Does Agnew's explanation account for the types of youths (individuals) who join gangs (e.g., working, middle or upper class youths, racially and ethnically)? b) Does Agnew's description of strain adequately explain the disproportionate number of minorities and males who join gangs?

At the height of the crack epidemic in the 1980s to early 1990s there was a concerted effort by older gang members in areas, such as Chicago, to recruit young (e.g., 10-year-olds) impressionable members into their gangs. This was out of a desire to maximize illicit drug profits while escaping their state's harsh drug penalties for adult offenders. Thus, the adults used juveniles to distribute drugs after offering them familial affection, a gun, and a message that as juveniles *nothing* would happen to them. The poor judgment of these rather young gang members was likely a significant element in the irrationality of much of the gang-related homicides of that era. After major law enforcement efforts, the violence subsided significantly; granted law enforcement activity was likely not the only element behind the decline. Nevertheless, in specific cities such as Houston, the local media have reported that an upswing in gang violence is new cause for concern.

Gangs in Texas are adopting a more multi-national ethnic membership and as such, it is inaccurate to ascribe criminal activities to any specific race or ethnicity. However, some gangs that are ethnic-based appear to have specific criminal tendencies. The 1995 national gang survey reported that Texas had the second largest number of gangs at 3,276 (Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 2004) behind California. In Texas, juvenile gang members are individuals age 17 and under, but there is a tendency for older individuals to be included in gangs with juvenile members. There are various categories of gangs. Some of these gangs include the delinquent youth gang, traditional turf-based gang, gain-oriented gang, violent or hate gang, tagging (graffiti) crews, and female gangs, to name a few (Abbott, 2001). Many of these gangs may overlap. The delinquent juvenile gangs generally consist primarily of juveniles who socialize. Members of these gangs are usually not involved in serious criminal activities such as assault or robbery nor have they been known to garner much attention from law enforcement.

The traditional turf-based gang is usually loosely structured and committed to defending the name and status of the gang. This group may include both juveniles and young adults who are associated with a geographic territory. Identifying symbols such as clothing styles, colors, hand signs and tattoos are typically used

along with the usage of graffiti to mark the gang's turf. According to Abbott's (2001) report of gangs in Texas, "at least one shooting (assault, homicide, or drive-by) has occurred in the previous year as a result of rivalry between this gang and another" (p. 48).

The gain-oriented gang is also loosely structured and consists of both juveniles and young adults. Gain-oriented gangs are involved in criminal activities for economic reasons. Some of the activities included robbery, burglary and, or the sale of controlled substances. These groups may share the characteristics of turf-based gangs and may even defend territory, however, when they act together as a gang it is for economic gains. Additionally, some members of the gang have set-up criminal operations in new areas to avoid pressure from law enforcement authorities.

Violent (hate) gangs may include juveniles and adults, or may be exclusive with either. This gang usually has an identifying style of dress, haircut, and tattoos (Abbott, 2001). Examples of some offenses committed by the members of these gangs are vandalism, assault, and, or homicide. The violence from these members usually has an ideological or religious rationale, which may include racism or Satanism. Another feature of this gang is the presence of random acts of violence and sometimes senseless violence.

The tagging crews and tagbangers (groups of individual taggers which evolve into gangs) are similar in some regards, such as their involvement in the vandalism of property. Members are motivated by the desire for attention and the use of graffiti as identification for themselves and the gang. The creation of graffiti by the taggers is considered a work of art. However, tagbangers who have had competition from the tagging crews and other street gangs have increased and expanded the range of their criminal activities. As a result, the tagbangers sometimes engaged in criminal behaviors beyond tagging (Abbott, 2001).

Gangs in Houston

Many of the common characteristics and patterns of gang activity in the United States are represented in Houston gang activity. Gangs could be found in most parts of Houston. Gang statistics, beginning in 1988, indicated that there was a steady increase in the total number of gangs in Houston. For example, in 1988, there were 23 reported gangs, in 1989, there were 63 and by 1991, there were 103 gangs reported (Bozeman, Mitchell, & Fougerousse, 1991). The total number of gang membership also increased. In 1989, gang membership stood at 333, but increased tremendously to 1,098, a 230% increase in 1991 (Bozeman et al., 1991). The Houston Police Department's Gang Division respondents in this study reported that in late November 2007, they were aware of 363 juvenile gang members, which is an increase from previous years.

Anderson and Diaz (1996) stated that juvenile gangs appear to be an increasing presence which has

caused the public to become more fearful. The authors also explained that juvenile offenses especially gang-related are some of the "most brutal recent homi-cides in Houston, a double-rape-murder of two teenage girls, was linked to juvenile gang initiation rites" (Lie-brum, 1994, p. A12). In 2005, a Houston local news report stated that gang violence was increasing; the Southwest Freeway, Hillcroft and Bissonnet areas were described as the most volatile areas for gang activities such as drug dealing, robberies and assault (Marshall, 2005). An independent daily newspaper staff writer for The Christian Science Monitor, Axtman, wrote in a 2005 an article revealing that MS -13, a Central Ameri-can gang was spreading rapidly in the city after the acci-dental killing of a toddler.

Based on the gang activities in Houston there is some indication that members of the gangs are juvenile, immature, loosely organized and that trends of increas-ing violence and drug trafficking are for financial gains (Bozeman et al., 1991). The Houston Police Department has classified gangs into four major categories, which include criminal street gangs, identity gangs, racist gangs and satanic gangs. Law enforcement has described the criminal street gangs as dangerous and hardcore because of their penchant for engaging in criminality and violence. Identity gangs tend to be social groups and not very threatening to social order. Racist gangs are generally aligned with specific ideology and hatred of minorities, while the satanic gangs mainly fol-low a ritual with no apparent criminal involvement.

In recent local news reports, an increase in gang-related problems has been attributed to New Orleans residents in Houston post hurricane Katrina in 2004 and Mexican gang activity. According to Glen's (2009) article written in the *Houston Chronicle* newspa-per, New Orleans gang wars were beginning to impact Houston as the violence spilled into the city. In an ear-lier article, Bryant and Khanna (2006) reported that some Katrina evacuees were taking turf battles into Houston, which included activities such as homicides and robberies. Also, in 2006, the *Houston Chronicle* published an article, titled *The butterfly and the knife/what readers are saying*, which discussed high school youths who were from the gangs *Crazy Crew* and *MS* and their involvement in violent acts against each other. Turner (2008) reported an Alan Fox led study that Houston had the most homicides by Black youths, some of which were attributed to gangs.

The local news (CBS 11 News) on August 3, 2009 produced by Raziq warned about the warring gangs hav-ing Houston's *Gulfton Ghetto* in a stranglehold. Accord-ing to this report, the Gulfton area has become a war zone as rival gangs struggle for territory and power. This area is also the headquarters for a gang known as the Southwest Cholos. The Houston police informed the local news that a Southwest Cholos gang member was shot several times in the parking lot-a young male, Car-los Rogue who was 17 years old. Further, witnesses claimed that the shooter was an MS-13 gang member

who was later arrested. The local news also revealed that in recent times, MS-13 gang members have been seeking to take control of the Gulfton area as more members take up residency. Reverend Alejandro Mon-tes from the San Mateo Iglesia Episcopal Church, who has witnessed the gang firsthand, stated that many of the youth in the Gulfton area see gangs and violence as sim-ply a way of life. Also, Wendy Pineda, youth coordina-tor at San Mateo, concurred with that assessment by stating that being a part of the gang is like breathing; something with which youth just learn to live.

Agnew's General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency (1985, 1992, 1994)

During the 1970s and 1980s the United States expe-rienced tremendous social and economic changes (Shelden et al., 2004; Wilson, 1987), amidst substantial political shifts. Increasing single-parent homes, crime, and the crack epidemic were significant tides in minor-ity communities. These rapid changes have been theo-rized to produce strain for youth. Agnew's general strain theory is most applicable to this context given its broad application of strain beyond mere economics. Agnew's theory also addresses some of the limitations of previ-ous strain theories. For example, he acknowledged that an increase in aspirations and a decrease in expectations do not mean that deviant behavior will automatically increase. Additionally, the manner in which youths respond to strain by engaging in delinquency may be dependent upon the magnitude of strain, the re-occur-rence, duration and the negative events taking place. However, youths experience a great deal of strain when those dreams are challenged or become impossible. Essentially, Agnew's general strain theory addresses ways in which strain may be measured and what corre-lation may exist between crime and strain. In this study, how well Agnew's strain theory appears to fit the devel-opment of juvenile gangs in Houston was evaluated.

Inability to achieve goals that are valued posi-tively.

Agnew (1992) explained that strain may occur when there is a divide between aspirations and expecta-tions. He continued that not only when future goals were jeopardized but when immediate goals were challenged that youths may experience strain. For example, based on the culture some youths have certain values such as status and respect which are especially important for males as a symbol of masculinity, and the inability to get those values may result in strain (Agnew, 1994).

The idea of the American dream causes strain for some individuals striving to achieve the dream, but who are unable to do so legitimately because of the lack of social and economic opportunities. The inability to achieve positive values gradually leads to despair and affects individual behavior, hopes and plans. Agnew (1992), and as cited in Akers and Sellers (2009), stated that strain is the end result of "the gap between expecta-

tions and actual achievements, which leads to anger, resentment and disappointment" (p. 199). Also, the manner in which individuals view what is just and the actual end results could lead youths to become more involved in criminal activities. Akers and Sellers explained this point by stating that youth would not view the events in their lives positively if they perceived that an investment of the same as others did not lead to equal rewards.

The absence of positive goals. Agnew (1992) explained the absence of positive goals by stating that the source of strain for an individual may lie in certain life experiences. For example, failure in school, death of a family member, or loved one, or relationship problems could all cause youths to develop negative feelings, which leads to strain. Agnew also stated that based on research it was found that the lack of, or absence of positive goals may result in strain.

The presence of negativity or crime. Agnew (1985) explained that the negative actions of others may affect individuals. In some cases, youths are unable to control the negativity or actions of others around them. Some examples of negativity or crime include exposure to child abuse, victimization, negative school experience, peer pressure and even community pressure (Agnew, 1985, 1992). In 1998, Hoffman and Miller stated that research on the strain theory revealed that negativity such as the loss of a loved one, parental problems such as unemployment often increased the chances of youths becoming delinquents. Akers and Sellers (2009) explained that youths, because of their age and laws in society, were not able to leave school or home freely without legal ramifications. So, crime and deviant behavior, which includes joining gangs, may become an enticing prospect so as to avoid the strain. In addition, responsibility becomes secondary rather than primary; hence, youths engage in deviant acts because strain is influenced by the conditions around them and the actions of others. Thus, youth may conform to gang activities in a context of anger, frustration, and loss of hope, which becomes close to being toxic as the strain becomes inevitable.

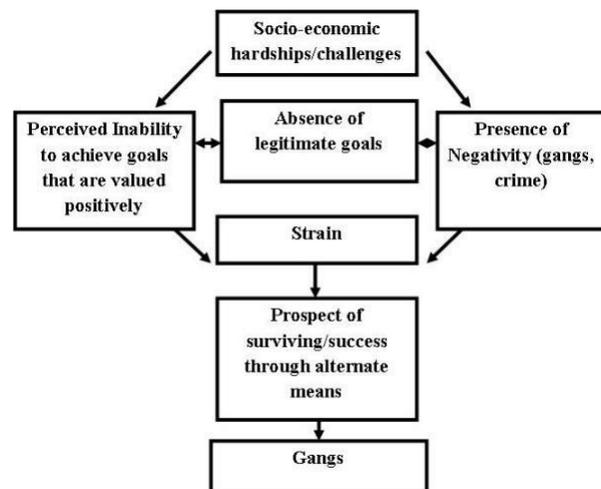
The strain theory seems applicable to recent juvenile gang development in Houston because strain is not predisposed to any specific race, class or gender. Similarly, gangs are not predisposed to any specific ethnicity, gender, or social class. It is, therefore, important to note that strain may be experienced by any individual in certain situations or environments. Strain, as put forth by Agnew, appears applicable as a theoretical explanation for juvenile gangs as many studies tend to target particular social groups and minorities rather than the strain that individuals undergo. Also, this theory has the potential to overcome the shortcomings of the previous strain theories given its breadth, which goes beyond mere economic strain.

Empirical tests of Agnew's General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency

Empirical findings on strain theory appear to be inconsistent, as evidence for its impact on crime or delinquency is not always clear. However, the general strain theory has its foundation in research in justice, stress, equity and regression as evident in some studies (Adams, 1963; Agnew, 1991; Folger, 1986; Pearlin, 1983). Given that autonomy is important to many juveniles, if their autonomy is hindered and goals are blocked then this may lead to delinquency. Anderson (1999) and Messerschmidt's (1993) empirical studies indicated that, especially for males, if there were perceived threats to masculinity these may influence deviance, including gang-related activities. There is also more evidence of some relationship between strain and delinquency, which may explain why some youths gravitate towards gangs (Agnew & White, 1992; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000). Some researchers have indicated that individuals, who had experienced strain as described by Agnew within a context where the presence of negativity existed or there was an absence of positive goals, were more likely to join gangs (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978; Nofzinger & Kurtz, 2005).

Broidy and Agnew (1997) argued that discrepancies exist in subjective strains, such as emotional strain between males and females. This factor is crucial to this study because it may explain why juvenile gangs consist overwhelmingly of males. Additionally, in a follow-up version of his earlier explanation of the general strain theory, Agnew (2006) argued that empirical evidence indicated that individuals exposed to strain have a much greater tendency to engage in criminal activities. Figure 1 displays the expected pattern of how strain might lead a juvenile into gang life.

Figure 1: How general strain theory may lead a juvenile to gang life



Method

Research Design

This was a descriptive qualitative effort to assess how well the tenets of Agnew's general strain theory might be said to fit recent developments of juvenile gangs and juvenile gang membership in Houston, Texas. A qualitative descriptive study was chosen because of the potential for integrating ideas and demonstrating outcomes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The approach allowed the researcher to effectively organize and demonstrate a sequence of ideas that may lead to certain outcomes by new discovery or integration of some ideas.

Data collection was by unstructured interviews and document analysis. The unstructured interviews were largely conversational, a process whereby one of the researchers had talks with individuals who had knowledge of gangs in Houston. Unstructured interviews were done in comfortable settings as that researcher attempted to access available information about the topic of interest. During these interviews, the researcher was able to listen for key terms such as drive-by, drug bust, killings, robberies, et cetera, committed by juveniles. The document analysis was of newspaper articles on gangs from the *Houston Chronicle* from 2006 to 2009. The analysis of news items allowed the researcher to observe patterns in media reports of juvenile gang-related activities in the area of interest during the period of interest. In media reports and newspapers, the researcher looked specifically for juvenile gang activities such as killings, robberies, drive-bys, and age of the youths, race, and the place where incidents occurred in recent years.

Data Collection

The data collection took place over approximately four weeks. The qualitative data collection was extensive and included an examination of secondary sources such as the National Youth Gang Survey, National Gang Threat Assessment, previous studies, local news, local newspaper and then, unstructured interviews. The use of interviews of knowledgeable individuals was critically important to this effort. The interviews queried the constitution of gangs, gang member demographics, gender roles, level of violence, reasons for joining a gang and intervention efforts. Interviews were done with care to minimize researcher bias. The first author who conducted the interviews kept a journal to monitor herself as the data collection instrument while in the field.

The interviews also assisted in the identification of gangs, hotspots, socio-economic factors, trends, race, and national and ethnic background of many gangs in the city.

At least five persons from the Mayor's Anti-Gang Task Force Office and from Houston Police Department were interviewed. These persons were also asked to

make reports, statistics, photographs, et cetera available for examination. Specifically, unstructured interviews were conducted with a senior officer from the Houston Police Department, and two others from Fondren Division Gang Unit and, former, potential and actual gang members in southwest Houston. Also interviewed were a director at the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office in Houston, and a staff member from the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office. A gang expert from the police department also assisted the researcher in identifying gang communities and gang graffiti therein. These interviews on juvenile gangs were limited to the city of Houston. From the interviews some important questions, in regard to gangs, affirmed and refuted some of the recent literature on gang activities. Beyond this, all *Houston Chronicle* newspaper reports on gangs from 2006 to 2009 were analyzed to identify gang trends as described by the media.

Analysis

The data analysis began with initial data collection and continued through the write-up of results. The initial stages of write-ups included text from the unstructured interviews, newspapers and other relevant reports. The data were assessed initially by reading and re-reading to identify emerging patterns and themes. The most relevant aspects of the interviews were transcribed within two days of being collected and color-coded to assist in identifying emerging trends. Data were also categorized into tables in an effort to isolate points that supported or refuted Agnew's strain theory. Diagrams and photographs were copied and the items thereon labeled and described for what appeared evident, latent or missing. A typology of gangs was developed based on different themes.

The complete analysis of data gathered was based on a data reduction process, to isolate relevant themes, patterns, categories and opposing viewpoints. The reduction involved a selection, focus, simplification, abstracting and transformation of data gathered during write-ups from the unstructured interviews. Data reduction was continuous as more important ideas and systematic themes became more pronounced. It is important to have a clear sequence and display of words in a qualitative study because otherwise analysis could be problematic.

Quality qualitative research demands that the human instrument of data collection and analysis discloses his or her paradigmatic lens. In keeping with this practice, the researchers are Black females, using critical constructivist paradigmatic lens to interpret data. This means that although the researchers approached this study critical of efforts to assist poor and marginalized minority persons, they made an effort to interpret the data as objectively as possible toward understanding how both gang members and those who work to reduce gang activity have constructed their knowledge of gangs in Houston.

Results

According to participants from the Houston Police Department (HPD) Gang Division, there are no juvenile gangs, but there are gangs with juvenile members. The department maintains a database on juvenile gang members. There is also no specificity to actual offenses committed solely by the juvenile gang members. While one researcher was visiting the HPD- Fondren Division Gang Unit, on the southwest side of Houston, she was fortunate to have made real contact with actual, former, and potential gang members in December 2009. These individuals were reluctant at times to disclose inside information about the gangs and their offenses in the presence of the researcher's police escorts. Nevertheless, the information gathered was revealing and is presented here.

During the unstructured interviews with police officers from the HPD Gang Division and the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, the participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on any factors that may have been instrumental in youths becoming involved in gangs. Participants were allowed to give recommendations of how youths might make the transition out of gangs; their thoughts of how the spread of gangs might be minimized; and how the Anti-Gang Task Force might assist youth in making a safe transition out of gang life.

Regarding Research - Question 1: How problematic is the gang situation in Houston?

The gang situation is very problematic in Houston because of its influence on crimes. According to officers

Table 1.

Houston gang members known to the Police January 2007- December 2009

January-December	Total Membership	Juvenile Members	Juvenile Members%	Marginal* Change in Juvenile Members%
2007	5,036	363	7.21	--
2008	8,135	566	6.96	55.92
2009	11,347	603	5.31	6.54

Source: (Personal communication - Ponder & Domínguez, Houston Police Department Gang Tracker (December 22, 2009).

*Marginal Change in Juvenile Members indicates incremental change in Juvenile Members

The gangs are violent. The consensus among the participants during the unstructured interview was that gangs, especially street gangs were violent mainly towards other gangs, but that the general population was safe. Officers from the HPD - Fondren Gang Division Unit stated that MS-13 and Southwest Cholos had been fighting at 57 Rampart for the past few months, which had resulted in the death of some Cholos gang members. The conflict between the two gangs is on-going. They also stated that they had seen an increase in crime incidences involving gang members from 2007 to 2009 as shown in Table 2. The number of incidents increased by

from the HPD Gang Division, and members from the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, it is evident that the gangs need to be contained and their influence must be minimized to protect other impressionable youths. Gangs in communities, such as the Gulfton area, Braeswood, Bissonnet, Dashwood, and Peachtree, in particular, have caused non-gang members to live in fear. Additionally, gangs affect not only the quality of life, but the quality of the neighborhood and businesses. Thus, the gang situation creates larger problems for the city of Houston and law enforcement. These gangs are increasing, violent, and widespread.

The gangs are increasing. Based on statistics provided by the Houston Police Department Gang Division, Gang members are increasing in every racial category that is documented by the Gang Division. Table 1 depicts numbers from January 2007 to December 2009. The number of gang members increased. Juvenile members increased 56% from 2007 to 2008; however, a police participant stated that the actual numbers for juveniles may be higher than indicated, for only those who have gotten the attention of law enforcement have been documented. Additionally, based on media reports there is gang resurgence in Houston (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 2005; *Houston Chronicle*, 2006; Raziq, 2009). More recent activities point toward economic incentives, but the activities vary depending on the type of gang and the goals of that gang.

1,368 from 2007 to 2008 and the numbers seem to have stabilized by the end of 2009. The incidences included burglary, robbery, drive-bys and other crimes committed by gangs that have garnered the attention of law enforcement. Also, during a conversation with some gang members from La Primera and 59 Bounty Hunters, it was revealed that they had lost family members and friends to their gang activities. The exact cause of the trend is uncertain, but may reflect influence from other big cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles, via the internet.

Table 2.
The increase of incidents involving gang members

January-December	Crimes/Incidence
2007	3,593
2008	4,961
2009	4,965

Source: (Personal communication - Ponder & Dominquez, Houston Police Department Gang Tracker (December 22, 2009).

The gangs are widespread. Gangs are widespread throughout the city, in prison and on the streets. Some officers mentioned that sometimes juvenile gang members were considered to be affiliated only with street gangs, but that was not always the case as indicated in Table 4, which shows the five largest memberships as of December 2009, as documented by the HPD. The general perception is that members of the *Houstone* must have a prison record as a pre-requisite, but then there are a few juvenile members documented. Also, some areas, especially in the Southwest area of Houston, tended to have more documented gangs and gang members than other areas (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Examples of Southwest Houston gangs

Gang	Initials	Ethnicity	Colors
Southwest Cholos	SWC	Hispanic	Black
La Primera (90st)	LP	Hispanic	White
La Tercera Crips	LTC	Hispanic	Blue
Surenos	SUR 13	Hispanic	Blue
Somos Pocos Pero Locos	SPPL	Hispanic	White
Mara Salvatrucha	MS 13	Hispanic	Blue
Houstone Tango Blast	Houstone, PTB	Hispanic	No specific color
Black Disciples	BD	African-American	Black or Blue
Gangster Disciples	GD	African-American	Black or Blue
52 Hoover Crip	52 HC or 52 HGC	African-American	Blue
59 Bounty Hunter	59 BH	African-American	Red
Treet Top Piru	TTP	African-American	Red

Source: (Personal communication - Ponder & Dominquez, Houston Police Department Gang Tracker (December 22, 2009).

Table 4.
Showing the top five gang memberships

Gang Name	Adults	Juveniles	Juvenile%
Houstone Tango Blast	2,208	5	0.23
52 Hoovers-Crips	903	55	6.1
59 Bounty Hunters	993	23	2.32
Southwest Cholos	604	129	21.36
Bloods	422	8	1.90
Total	5,130	220	4.29

Source: (Personal communication - Ponder & Dominquez, Houston Police Department Gang Tracker (December 22, 2009).

How gangs affect communities. Being a part of the gang not only affects the individual gang member, but the family and businesses which constitute the community. According to the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office and officers from the HPD, many in the community may move to other areas because of fear. The community becomes disintegrated as businesses move away, families become separated and the reputation of the communities begins to wane. In many of the areas visited, graffiti could be seen on buildings throughout the neigh-

borhoods. According to officers from the HPD - Fondren Gang Division Unit, the graffiti is often done by the younger members of gangs. Additionally, gangs begin to fester as the environmental conditions further enable gang activities and behaviors. Staff at the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office highlighted the impact on the family and gang member.

For instance, the impact on the family included family members living in fear. Relocation may become necessary because of threats, fights and possibilities of

being a victim of a drive-by. Also, medical and legal fees are incurred by injuries and deaths. There is also the possibility that innocent people may be caught in the web of gang violence.

In terms of the impact on the gang member there is the loss of the trust from family and friends. The gang member becomes a bad role model. He or she may become a truant and academic achievement becomes less important. In addition, the gang member lives in fear and danger of ever traveling alone, gets tattoos on the body, employment opportunities become limited, the probability of a criminal record/police contact is higher, may get probation, parole, jail or prison sentence for gang activities, and may lose life or get injured or paralyzed.

The brief encounter with juveniles who were affiliated with gangs revealed that they view the gang in a positive light. They were also uncertain about why they joined the gang, but revealed that they had family members in the gang. Some of the juvenile members from the *La Primera gang* revealed that they also had parents who held regular working jobs.

The role of females in gang. The documentation and actual knowledge of females in gangs in Houston were limited. The Houston Police Department- Gang Division officers stated that despite the fact that data indicated that there were female gang members, it was difficult to ascertain whether or not they were truly independent. Table 5 indicates that there are female gang members, but it does not show if those are actually female gangs or female members of predominantly male gangs. According to an officer, sometimes female gang members switch gangs because they were dating a gang member and so it was difficult to say to which gangs they belonged or their actual role. Additionally, some officers noted that there was still a stereotype in how gangs were viewed and how data collection was done on gangs because males were more likely to be categorized as gang members, but identifying female members is more difficult. Nevertheless, officers stated that based on their interaction with some gangs, females may play major roles and some were as brutal as male gang members. Overall, females in gangs appear to be more of a support to the male gang members than independent leaders.

Question 2: How applicable is Agnew's general strain theory of crime and delinquency to recent developments of juvenile gangs in Houston?

Agnew's general strain theory of crime and delinquency appears considerably applicable to the recent

developments of juvenile gangs in Houston, Texas. Data have shown some current and former gang members have experienced what might be called strain. Agnew mentioned three variables that might cause an individual to experience strain: inability to achieve goals viewed positively, absence of legitimate goals and presence of negativity. The extent of the strain however, for the gang members was unclear.

Does Agnew's explanations account for the types of youths (individuals) who join gangs?

For example, working, middle or upper class youths, racially and ethnically? To some extent Agnew's explanations account for the types of youths who join gangs. One of the main elements of Agnew's theory in explaining strain is that there is a disparity between aspirations and expectations. Many gang members with whom the researcher held conversations revealed that respect was very important to them, and if they did not have that then they would do whatever was necessary to achieve it. In essence, joining the gang became a primary sign of status that they perceived would give them the respect that they desired. Associates from two gangs, *La Primera* and *59 Bounty Hunters* revealed that they joined the gang because they wanted respect and they viewed the gang as family. Markedly, however, for Black gang members this drive for respect was tied to illicit drug transactions, for Hispanics there seemed to be more concern about turf. Similarly, younger gang members might seek respect from tagging (the preferred term for more artistic graffiti).

Officers from the HPD - Gang Division, individuals from the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, and an officer from Furr High School stated that based on the statistics and their contacts with gang members, gang members were mostly minorities from a working class background. The individuals whom the researcher met and who claimed affiliation with gangs also described their backgrounds as working class without using that term. For example, many single-parents with very little education were living in an apartment in certain neighborhoods with unstable employment. According to a senior officer from Houston Police Department, when the Gang Division referred to working class it generally did so in terms of income status, as too often the financial burden was an underlining part of why many youths turned to gangs. Based on statistics, minorities made up approximately 92% of all gang members in Houston. As highlighted in Table 5, the numbers indicate that two racial and ethnic groups made up the majority of gang members.

Table 5.
Showing gang membership statistics - race/ethnicity and gender

Group	Male	Female	Total	Group%
Asian	40	1	41	0.35
Black	5111	76	5187	44.52
Hispanic	5411	102	5513	47.31
Indian	3	0	3	0.03
White	882	19	901	7.73
Other	7	0	7	0.06
Total	11,454	198	11,652	100

Source: (Personal communication - Ponder & Domínguez, Houston Police Department Gang Tracker (December 22, 2009).

However, five of the gang members with whom the researcher had conversations did not perceive that they belonged to gangs, but to organizations. A member from 59 Bounty Hunters stated emphatically that it is the police who labeled the organizations as gang. Indeed, one pointed out that the term *BLOODS*, a popular street gang, stood for *Brothers Leading Other Out of Darkness* and they did not consider the negative connotations that were usually attached to gangs as impacting them. This expressed sentiment made it difficult to really assess the effect of strain if there is no acknowledgment of negativity being attached to the activities by gang members.

Based on theoretical explanations and conversations with those interviewed, gang members who perceived that they were unable to achieve certain goals positively would turn to gangs. Conversations with the gang members revealed that they believed that joining a gang was the right thing and some claimed to have no regrets. When asked about their life at home many admitted that they lived in apartments and some of their relatives were also in the gang or were former gang members. Indubitably, many felt some strain or perceived that they were obligated to join a gang. Agnew examined the presence of negativity (gangs and crimes) as causing a strain, after all, gangs tended to fester in low-income areas where there was also a lot of crime. For example, the Gulfton community, (nicknamed the *Gulfton ghetto*) is believed to be the most populated neighborhood in Houston (according to research respondents from the HPD - Fondren Division Gang Unit). Most of the individuals in the area are minorities and many of the youths belong to a gang.

Does Agnew's description of strain adequately explain the disproportionate number of minorities who join gangs?

Presence of negativity (gangs, crime). Officers from the HPD - Gang Division stated that a part of the problem was that a majority of gang members were made up of minorities (see Table 5) who belong to working class families and lived in the inner cities. Many of the conditions that were common to inner cities were observed in the southwest region of Houston. Typ-

ical conditions in the inner cities include many apartments, unemployed individuals, high crime rates and poor performing schools, as well as many single parents. These conditions reflected the fruits of ingrained racism. Even though gangs were everywhere and in large cities, they are more concentrated in inner-cities. With the convergence of negativity in these areas, youths experience strain amidst a fear of their conditions. As a result, many individuals were relegated into choosing one gang or the other because they needed protection from gangs/bullies, needed structure, belonging, discipline, and the gang appeared to be a promising prospect to mediate these strains.

Additionally, many gang members perceived a need to claim their hometowns and being affiliated with a particular gang made that possible and a requirement. Data revealed that for most African-American gangs, the members wanted survival and income from selling drugs, while for Hispanic gangs the focus was more territorial and family oriented. Many youths who joined the gang, did so as young as seven years old and followed in the footsteps of their relatives and friends. During the conversation with members from 59 Bounty Hunters, one member revealed that he had a daughter at 15-years-old. The cycle of children raising children meant that the gang problem was far from ceasing, as there appeared to be no one to show the offspring of very young parents anything different than the life before him or her. Essentially, the neighborhood became a stimulus for gang activities because of the amount of negativity and crime.

Absence of legitimate goals. As the common African proverb says *it takes a village to raise a child*. It is difficult for youth to grow up and make good decisions without having a positive role model. Therefore, the community/neighborhood becomes even more important in helping to define youth. As a result, where the norms are being a high school dropout, joining a gang, defending territory, selling drugs and making money, to name a few, then it becomes problematic for youth to have dreams or goals through legitimate means. In this regard, youth experience some strains to get involved in the gang because they do not believe that they have the ability to achieve goals valued positively by society.

Others may join the gang because they deem it the most accessible to obtain their objectives. Also, based on conversations with gang members, they did not believe that they were engaging in illegitimate activities because that was the life as they knew it and had seen it since they were born. In essence, it is difficult for them to even discern what legitimate goals are, given their limited purview of life and its possibilities.

Discussion

Limitations

The limitations of the study include those common to qualitative research such as the utilization of a small non-random sample, the inability to generalize, and the subjective nature of much of the data collection and interpretation. Aware of these possibilities, the researchers made a conscious effort to be as objective as possible in data collection and interpretation in the pursuit of detailed but authentic information. Another limitation is that gang members encountered during the study were unwilling to be open at times in commenting on their participation in certain activities, as the police escorted the researcher who did the interviews into the gang communities. An additional limitation is that the news-paper content that was analyzed indubitably reflected someone else's subjective approach and interpretation of the gang situation. Despite these limitations, the study is a very worthy one for the richness of detail and primary accounts that may not be generated other than by first-hand communication with those directly in contact with gang members in the city of Houston and the gang members themselves. It focused on strain as outlined by Agnew as preceding gang activities and being the main reason for youths joining the gang. The particular aspects of strain involved a strong desire for respect and the belongingness of a family. These might be indicative of their economic conditions, but the gang members did not have this in the forefront of their discourse on why they were involved with the gangs.

Conclusions and Future Implications

The results indicated that two of the tenets of Agnew's general theory of crime and delinquency - presence of negativity and absence of legitimate goals, seemed to fit the descriptions of recent juvenile gang developments in Houston. However, the results were not conclusive. Given the limited purview of this study, other factors likely contributed to the intricacies of juvenile gang membership; hence, the findings presented must be read and interpreted with caution. Possibly other theories may be a closer fit for understanding Houston's gangs. Nevertheless, the present study gives credence to some of Agnew's perspectives on the general strain theory that may be applicable to juvenile gangs.

One theoretical implication is that many of the problems could be fixed. As previously mentioned, many of the youths involved in gangs are minorities, and programs are often suggested as the solution to the problems they face. Programs play a critical role in helping to reform youths and are necessary, but alone they are insufficient. Youths who have become involved in gang activities are resistant to change because of the deep-seated problems they face in the home, neighborhood, school, and related areas. Each individual is unique, and a multi-layered approach is often best to address numerous challenges.

Based on conversations held with officers from the Houston Police Department Gang Division, Mayor's Anti-Gang Office, and former gang members, it is evident that there is a relationship between the gangs and being minorities. Minorities who are involved in gangs appear to be concentrated in poorer neighborhoods with limited resources, more crime and less education, which create a strain in forcing juveniles to face an ultimatum. Additionally, it appears as though officers are more inclined to use suppression rather than prevention in trying to resolve the juvenile gang problem in Houston. That focus means that the social isolation and violence of gangs will not be reversed in the near future. Therefore, more focus on prevention, and educating youths, parents and the communities at an earlier stage rather than later is very important. More needs to be done about the types of neighborhoods to which many youth are relegated.

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