

Gangs in Chicago

While New York City has experienced only sporadic gang problems since the mid-1960s, Chicago’s institutionalized neighborhood gangs have remained an entrenched problem since the 1950s. John Hagedorn has traced the roots of violence among Chicago’s institutionalized “supergangs” all the way back to post–World War I race riots, when white workers and the Ku Klux Klan expelled African Americans from industrial jobs they had obtained while whites were fighting overseas (Hagedorn undated). During the Depression, as jobs in every sector became scarce and Mexicans were subjected to mass deportation, youth violence increased as small “corner groups” of black and brown youths clashed against white ethnic gangs in defense of their neighborhoods.

As immigrant ethnic groups and racial minorities competed for jobs, hegemony over the city’s political machinery shifted among various ethnic elements, with the Irish ultimately sustaining control of the uppermost levels of power. Both licit and illicit opportunity structures were solidly blocked against most African Americans and Mexicans, as white ethnic groups held sway in both the labor market and the underground economy. Contained by racism and racial segregation, African Americans remained stuck at the very bottom of the ranks. When deindustrialization gutted the city’s supply of manufacturing jobs, they remained trapped in unemployment and poverty. Ranked in terms of black/white dissimilarity in housing patterns, Chicago continues to score as the most racially segregated city in the nation (Frey and Myers 2002).

In *Stateville*, his groundbreaking study of prison culture, James Jacobs examined how police repression and mass imprisonment of Chicago’s “supergangs” helped to transform both Illinois prisons and the gangs themselves (Jacobs 1977). In the 1960s federal social policy turned to a focus on juvenile delinquency, and federal dollars began to flow into grassroots organizations in high-crime urban neighborhoods. Around

the same time, Chicago street gang leaders began to gravitate toward grassroots political action.

On the South Side, community organizers and church leaders cultivated relationships with charismatic gang members and fostered their development as legitimate grassroots leaders. Both Blackstone Rangers (the street gang that evolved into the Black P. Stone Nation and ultimately became known as the El Rukns) and Devil’s Disciples were drawn into The Woodlawn Organization (TWO), Saul Alinsky’s dynamic grassroots organization. TWO garnered substantial financial support from both private foundations and the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to create youth employment programs while thumbing its nose at city hall and drawing intense opposition from the Chicago police.

Similar developments ensued on the West Side, where the Lawndale-based Conservative Vice Lords, advised by a Peace Corps veteran, founded Operation Bootstrap. They allied with Jesse Jackson and soon attracted funding for a host of social action programs. But at the same time that the Lindsay administration in New York was embracing community action programs such as these, and deliberately enlisting gang leaders from among the city’s “worst kids” to serve as staff for recreation and jobs programs, Mayor Richard J. Daley’s response was quite different.

Lacking John Lindsay’s progressive vision of “urban action” against poverty, Daley feared that the gangs’ increasing role in building grassroots power, and the liberal allies they were attracting, would upset his political machine. As TWO was launching its OEO-funded youth programs, the Daley administration was beefing up the police department’s gang intelligence unit and initiating a crackdown of intense police harassment, arresting Woodlawn youths for petty crimes and curfew violations and conducting warrantless intrusions of TWO offices (Jacobs 1977).

In 1968 both the Blackstone Rangers and the Vice Lords gave Daley his due by working hard to upset his political machine at the polls. Daley promptly increased the gang intelligence unit from 38 to 200 officers. Illinois prisons were soon flooded with gang members sent en masse by the Chicago courts. Gang leaders swept into prison as “political prisoners” with a vivid sense of their organizational power. Once they were there, they set vigorous recruitment drives in motion. By 1972 at least half of Illinois prisoners were said to be affiliated with gangs. As the gangs took over the prison market for contraband and solidified their control of prison programs, gang affiliation provided members with both economic and social benefits.

The massive infusion of gang members came at a time when liberal prison reformers were working to loosen the hold of the traditional prison management regime in the state’s maximum-security institutions in order to improve prison conditions. As old-time prison guards chafed under a new system of authority geared toward a “human relations” model of management, the Black P. Stone Nation, Vice Lords, Disciples, and Latin Kings came to dominate, control, and transform the prison’s social system.

Gang members came to prison with a spirit of rebellion against authority gained on the streets of Chicago during the 1960s and a sense of racial and social solidarity stemming from a mix of street gang traditions and radical black nationalism. They quickly cast aside the traditional “inmate code”—with its hierarchy based on offense type and a “do your own time” ethos—replacing it with strong communal values of solidarity between gang brothers and loyalty to gang leadership. Prisoners learned how to “do gang time.”

Prison guards saw themselves undermined by the “pro-inmate” reforms imposed by the new management in power above them and challenged by the belligerent rebels they faced on the tiers. The level of intergang violence increased. As guards became more and more demoralized, prisoners increasingly resisted their control, mounting periodic food strikes, physical attacks on guards, and bouts of taking hostages. In 1973 a prison guard was murdered.

Prison managers responded to strikes and violence with lockdowns. They constructed a special housing unit where supermaximum conditions prevailed. Between 1970 and 1975 Stateville appeared to teeter on the verge of chaos, but a full-scale prison uprising never materialized. Jacobs reports that prison managers, guards, and prisoners alike attributed the

gang leaders, who feared an Attica-style response from the state, with credit for restraining violence within bounds.

Daley’s repression of Chicago’s politicized gangs only increased their membership and strengthened their cohesion. The policy of prison containment made recruitment easier in a setting where rejecting gang membership meant endangering one’s property and personal safety. The crucible of prison tested gang loyalties and forged strong bonds to gang leadership. As prisoners were released to the streets of Chicago, the gang allegiances they gained in prison shaped their reentry experiences.

The experience of surviving mass imprisonment toughened the hide of Chicago gang members and consolidated their organizational structure, making them more durable and contributing to their institutionalization. Hagedorn explains the concept of institutionalized gangs as follows:

There have been many attempts to categorize gangs, but in the context of this study, US gangs can be differentiated between *interstitial* and *institutionalized* gangs. The US father of gang research, Frederic Thrasher, used *interstitial* to describe early Chicago gangs. It literally means “in between” or the transitions of youth, as from one neighborhood to a better one and/or from childhood to young adult. Most US gangs were, and continue to be, transitional interstitial groups, rising with one set of peers and declining as its peer group matures.

But in some cities, particularly Chicago and Los Angeles, gangs institutionalized, or persisted over generations. To say that a gang has institutionalized signifies that it persists despite leadership changes (e.g. killed, incarcerated, or matured out), has an organization complex enough to sustain multiple roles of members (including children), adapts to changing environments without dissolving (e.g. police repression), fulfils some community needs (economic, security, services), and organizes a distinct outlook of its members (sometimes called a gang subculture). (Hagedorn undated)

When Chicago gang members began to look to the civil rights movement and community action programs as vehicles out of poverty and segregation, Mayor Daley’s incarceration campaign smashed

their hopes and dreams. But Hagedorn maintains that the lengthy prison terms received by gang leaders could not break their ties to street chapters. By the time they returned to the streets, the decline in Chicago's industrial jobs left them no options aside from what remained in the underground economy. They crowded into Chicago's hypersegregated high-rise housing projects with drugs and guns the only tools at hand.

Federal funds for construction of public housing had become available during the 1960s, but Mayor Daley's deep commitment to racial containment did not allow for dispersal of housing sites outside of Chicago ghettos (Hagedorn and Rauch 2004). The Robert Taylor Homes epitomized the Daley-era approach, with 28 towering blocks of high-rise projects warehousing 27,000 Chicagoans, virtually cutting them off from access to better schools and work opportunities in white neighborhoods.

As the drug economy heated up in the 1980s, the flow of city services and public housing resources began to recede from Chicago projects like Robert Taylor. New York's epidemic of lethal youth gun violence in the late 1980s appeared to fade in the face of concentrated drug enforcement operations by the police. During the same period Chicago police addressed increased levels of violence with a crackdown on the institutionalized gangs that John Hagedorn says may only have increased the level of violence. Police repression only fragmented gang leadership, causing intragang violence.

Gang fragmentation and violence were further exacerbated in Chicago during the mid-1990s when the public housing authority shifted millions of dollars from needed maintenance and renovation of the city's high-rise projects to finance a drug enforcement campaign involving massive gang sweeps.

When that strategy proved largely fruitless, the city began to demolish the projects, forcing more than a hundred thousand tenants to move. Instead of building new housing for them, the housing authority gave displaced tenants rent vouchers. Scattered relocation to other segregated, high-crime areas of the city dislocated people from long-established social networks and increased friction and violence among Chicago gangs.

New York faced similar economic pressures from deindustrialization through the same period. Poor neighborhoods suffered huge declines in housing stock as landlords abandoned buildings to deterioration and arson. But even while the youth homicide epidemic raged, city government committed billions to new affordable housing initiatives, refurbishing abandoned buildings, constructing new housing on vacant land, and sparking an urban revival in burned-out neighborhoods like the South Bronx. Residents experienced far less displacement and were able to benefit from the improvements in their neighborhoods.

While Chicago neighborhoods like Lawndale and Englewood declined during the 1990s, the South Bronx began to climb out of the economic and social blight that prevailed in the previous decade, lessening the level of youth violence and helping to speed the unprecedented drop in New York City's violent crime rate that has continued to the present time.

Hagedorn maintains that the displacement of tens of thousands of African American families, sometimes fracturing renegade splinter groups off institutionalized gangs, has played a role in the persistence of high levels of violence due to gang wars and drug market disputes. While New York's homicide rate plummeted, Hagedorn points out, Chicago's declined only slightly (Hagedorn undated).