

There is a wealth of research on the origins of gangs and the activities and characteristics of their members, as well as a smaller but useful body of literature that seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of various gang control strategies and tactics. Unfortunately, public officials rarely draw on this resource, opting instead to make policy by anecdote.

Gang policy is often made in moments of perceived crisis, when law enforcement agencies and elected officials feel intense pressure to “do something” about gangs immediately—a poor atmosphere for considering questions that will determine the success or failure of a gang control strategy.

Sober policy making is made even more difficult by the larger-than-life quality that attaches to any conversation about gangs. Gangs thrive on publicity of all kinds. Their members often go to great pains to make themselves visible and to exaggerate the threat they pose to society. They are often aided and abetted by politicians and the media, who also thrive on the sensational reaction that gangs—with their menacing tattoos, graffiti, colors, and hand signs—elicit from the public.

Gang researchers are not immune to America’s long romance with gangs, but for the most part their work provides a helpful antidote to the overblown rhetoric of gang members and those who would make the eradication of gangs a national priority. Their work can help us answer critical questions that should—but usually don’t—guide policy making: Who are gang members? Why do they join gangs, and—equally important—why do they leave? What do gangs do? What is the relationship between gang activity and crime? What do we want to accomplish through our gang control efforts, and how do we expect it to happen? Should we focus on gangs at all?

The following chapters seek to shed light on these questions and debunk some of the most tenacious myths about what gangs are and how gang problems can best be addressed.