

Introduction to: Venkatesh, S. (2008). *Gang Leader for a Day*. New York: Penguin Press.

Gangs are an important area of research within both criminology and criminal justice whose popularity as a topic has waxed and waned over the years.

Numerous questions about gangs are of interest:

1. What are the effects of gang membership on individuals? The current work would seem to suggest that they increase propensity or likelihood of criminal or delinquent involvement and has estimated the processes whereby that takes place (Campbell, 1984, 1985; Cohen, 1956). Research also has thought about how the processes are different for girls as compared to boys, or gangs of different ethnicities.
2. If gangs are a problem for teens or pre-teens then maybe we can help prevent that through programming. GREAT has been one program studied extensively. Whether it works is a tough question (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999).
3. Maybe police should have specialized gang-prevention units? Are these effective (Katz, 2001, 2003; Katz, Maguire, & Roncek, 2002)? What makes it more likely a police department will develop a specialized unit?
4. Since very early work (Thrasher, 1927) there has been interest in *where* are the gangs, and are different types of gangs found in different places. Tita has recently started looking at what he has called gang set space – where they do stuff – and tried to link that both to community structure and to crime (Tita & Ridgeway, 2007; Tita, Cohen, & Engberg, 2005).
5. More recently there has been concern not just about gangs, but also about what type of data do we have to provide information about types of gang crimes, preferably at a national level (Bilchik, 1999; Curry, Ball, & Decker, 1996).
6. Naturally there has been much work on connections between gangs and drugs and drug markets. Maintaining and expanding drug sales has become a huge activity for many urban and even suburban gangs (Hagedorn, 1994).
7. The structural variation around gang membership has been a perennial topic of discussion; for example, do low socioeconomic status neighborhoods make gang formation more likely (Miller, 1958)?
8. One of the **toughest** questions is developing a better understanding of the functions that gangs serve in neighborhoods. Are there ways they can help neighborhoods? Some research has resoundingly suggested yes (Heitgard & Bursik, 1987; Suttles, 1968). Gangs help defend neighborhoods in times of racial or ethnic change. *It is important to be clear about the distinction between the impact of gangs on individuals vs. the impacts of gangs on areas or locations.* These are two separate questions.
9. We have recently witnessed an excellent spate of urban ethnographies that have a lot to say about gangs, at some level of formality (Bourgois, 1996; Simon & Burns, 1997; Williams, 1989)

Venkatesh's work takes us into one of the worst public housing communities in the country. He gets to look at one particular gang through the eyes of a leader, and through the eyes of the residents, some social workers, and some community leaders.

At the ecological level we can ask: most importantly, how is the gang a part of the community? What is it doing **for** the community and what is it doing **to** the community?

At the group and organizational level we can ask: How does the gang get along with the community leaders? In what ways does this work? In what ways does it not work?

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