

The Real Gangs of New York

by {ga=mberkeygerard}

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At a recent public forum at City Council, police, school officials, politicians, and other experts offered their best guesses as to why the number of gang members in the city has risen over 30 percent in the last year.

"We live in a criminal environment," said one expert. "There are cops in our schools, the mayor is obsessed with crime, innocent people are being shot 41 times. It creates a mentality of crime in young people."

This particular expert has first-hand experience with the question. She is 19 years old and a member of the Latin Queens, complete with the tattoo of a crown on her ankle.

The city has spent increased amount of money and energy in recent years trying to crack down on gangs that recruit young people like her.

In 1997, the mayor [stepped up his effort](#) to combat gangs, focusing on them as criminal enterprises, not just as groups of juvenile delinquents. In 1998, the Board of Education agreed to give school security over to the police department with officers patrolling some hallways. And last year, a bill was introduced that would give police the power to arrest suspected gang members loitering on street corners.

Despite such efforts, gangs and their crimes are a routine part of news headlines. Recently 18 members of [The Mexican Boys gang](#) were arrested for carrying knives and guns on their way to a party of a rival gang in Brooklyn. The [Albany County jail](#) had the highest rate of violence in its history this year, with many of the incidents occurring between New York City and upstate gangs. And last month, three teenagers were arrested in connection with the shooting death of a man in Central Park, the first homicide there in two years. The teens claimed affiliation with both the Bloods and the Crips, though police later determined that they were lying. Clearly, gangs still hold some appeal.

The 19-year-old member of the Latin Queens, who asked that only her last name, Vargas, be used, suggested some reasons why.

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"There are no jobs, no programs for youth, our schools are falling apart," Vargas said. "Our youth bond together for protection and opportunity."

While not everybody would agree with her - New York offers more cultural opportunities and youth programs, some say, than many other cities with gang problems -- Councilmember Ken Fisher, chair of the Youth Services Committee, seemed to Agree with Vargas at least in part. "I find it troubling that the same day we hear the police testify to an increase in gang members the mayor proposes a 20 million dollar cut in funding for youth services," said Fisher.

Youth gangs have been a part of New York City life as long as young people have been hanging out on the streets looking for something to do. Unlike adult crimes, most juvenile crime is committed in groups. And gangs offer a sense of identity, camaraderie, and financial payoff for their loyalty.

Notable New York City Gang Movies

West Side Story (1961)

This Academy Award winning adaptation of the Broadway musical pits two rival street gangs-the Jets and

The Cross and the Switchblade (1971)

Based on a true story, Pat Boone plays a small-town preacher who helps gang leader Nicky Cruz get out

Mean Streets (1973)

Robert De Niro plays a wanna-be hood on the streets of Little Italy in Martin Scorsese's breakthrough film

Lords of Flatbush (1974)

Starring a young Sylvester Stallone and Henry Winkler, the movie tracks the action and ethos of 1950's

Warriors (1979)

An action flick that reached cult status for its inner city kids with big-hair waging massive turf wars.

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Year of the Dragon (1985)

A Polish cop's attempt to rid Chinatown of crime and drug cartels turns the neighborhood into a modern

New Jack City (1991)

New York City street thugs turn into a massive drug syndicate and make actors Ice-T, Wesley Snipes, a

Gangs of New York (due out Fall 2001)

Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz star in an \$80 million blockbuster about the rise of Irish and Italia

The difference is that today's gangs are more widespread and more dangerous. It is estimated that 94 percent of medium and large-cities in the U.S. have gang activity. And with easy access to guns and the drugs market, gangs present a more substantial criminal force.

"These kids are not afraid of death or jail," said Robert DeSena who has worked with Brooklyn gangs since 1975. "Once a kid reaches that mindset, you've got a hard-core challenge."

DEFINING IMAGE

Popular images of gang members range from Tony, who fell in love with a rival gang member's sister in West Side Story, to the violent gang-bangers who run the Los Angeles streets in the movie Boyz 'N the Hood. There are a wide range of perceptions, and misperceptions, of what youth gangs do and who is a part of them.

The [New York Police Department](#) defines a gang as a group that engages in criminal behavior and has a formal organizational structure, identifiable leadership, and territory. The [U.S. Department of Justice](#) estimates that there are approximately 750,000 gang members in 28,000 gangs in the U.S., although no one really knows how many there are because accurate counts are nearly impossible to make. It is estimated that females make up approximately 20 percent of the national gang population. And while the average age of gang members is 17, nearly half of all gang members range in age from 18 to 25 year.

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The New York Police Department recently reported that the known gang members in the city increased from 11,000 to 15,000 in the past year. However, many researchers doubt the validity of such numbers.

"I've stayed away from New York statistics for years," said Malcolm Klein from the Center for Research for Crime and Social Control, who has been studying gangs for over two decades. Prior to 1976, New York City's Youth Services Administration kept more dependable gang statistics in the city, but in the fiscal problems of the city, the administration was disbanded and tracking was handed over to police.

While the ethnic make-up of gangs, the streets they call "turf," and the names they give themselves have changed over time, the common factor is social class. Most gang members come from lower or working-class backgrounds, looking for a way to gain power in the social order.

HISTORY OF GOTHAM STREETS

Youth gangs have always been part of New York City life.

In 1807, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in lower Manhattan complained to the city about the gangs of white, working class youths who harassed churchgoers, according to the book, ["Gotham"](#) by Edwin G. Burroughs and Mike Wallace. By the 1820's, the authors explain, young men "swaggered about the city after work and on Sundays, staking out territories, picking fights, defending the honor of their street and trade."

Until the mid-1900's, a majority of gangs in America were white, composed of boys from various European backgrounds.

The postwar gangs in the 1940's-1960's were primarily "turf" gangs who defended their areas against neighboring ethnic groups and new immigrants. In his recent book, ["Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings,"](#) Eric Schneider presents Postwar gang life as a world of switchblades, zoot suits, slums, and bebop music. Young men took on brash names like Enchanters, Young Lords, Bishops, Greene Avenue Stompers, and the Latin Gents.

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While youth gangs were often seen as "violent, short-lived, disorganized collections of misfits whose main purpose was thrill seeking and immediate gratification," says Schneider, they provided a social structure for working-class boys that provided a sense of identity, place, and masculinity.

By 1970, about four-fifths of gang members were either African-American or Hispanic. And the late 1980's and early 1990's saw the growth of West Coast gangs like the Crips and the Bloods, although most experts dispute the notion that the gangs actually migrated across the country. Instead they are local, non-centralized gangs that go by the same names and wear the same identifying colors.

Today in New York, the most prominent New York City gangs are Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, Nietas, Five Prisoners, Silenciosos, Matatones, Rat Hunters, and Zulu Nation. They are groups that span ethnicity, race, and neighborhoods.

FROM TURF TO DRUGS, FROM FISTS TO GUNS

Two major changes in recent years have transformed the nature of youth gangs.

First, the influx of illegal drugs--first heroin, then cocaine, and then crack cocaine--changed street gangs from social groups to economic enterprises. Instead of fighting over the geography of turf, gangs began to wage war over corners used to sell drugs. The institution of the [Rockefeller drug laws](#)

in 1973 and stiffer prison penalties for adults, had a bitterly ironic result: Drug dealers began to recruit minors to do much of their selling on the streets.

While gangs have become a significant part of the drug trade (a recent study that gangs are involved in about a quarter of the drug arrests), most researchers argue that youth gangs are not major drug traffickers.

"Drug gangs separate themselves from street gangs," said Klein. "Drugs requires tight corporate-like structure that youth do not have."

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The second and perhaps the most devastating change is the availability of guns. It is estimated that gang related homicides increased nearly five times between 1987 and 1994.

"Violence has always been around, usually concentrated amongst the poor," said [Geoffrey Canada](#), who runs the non-profit Rheedlin Center for Children and Families in Harlem. "The difference is that we never had so many guns in our inner cities. The nature of the violent act has changed from the fist, stick, and knife to the gun."

THE RIKER'S ISLAND GANG MUSEUM

To visit the offices of the Gang Unit at Riker's Island is to visit a virtual museum of gang paraphernalia.

The walls are covered with photographs of gang member [tattoos](#), red and blue bandanas from the Crips and the Bloods, and rosaries with black and yellow beads used by members of the Latin Kings. There is a display of home-made weaponry: knives made from pocket combs, razor blades fashioned from bottle caps, and even a small gun made from a toilet paper roll and rubber bands. And on the desk are computers used to enter the information into the city's gang database.

It is all part of the Corrections Department's "zero tolerance" policy on gangs and the city's attempt to enhance its gang intelligence.

At Riker's Island, gang members are stripped of any kind of identifying clothing or trinkets, forced to live in the same rooms with rival gangs, and any act of violence automatically adds time to their sentence. The Correction's Department says it is working. The incidence of violence in the city's jail is at the lowest in over a decade.

The School Safety and Prevention Service's division of the New York City operates under a similar notion. If any student exhibits gang behavior-wearing colors, using hand signals, graffiti, or any criminal activity-they are immediately removed from school.

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Efforts to pass legislation to control gangs are generally more difficult. Most of the [state legislation](#) has to do with graffiti and tougher sentences for assault.

Last year in the city, Councilmembers John Sabini and Michel Abel introduced a bill that would give police the power to arrest suspected gang members loitering on street corners. The legislation drew criticism from civil rights groups and others who thought the law would lead to police abuse. Currently the proposed legislation is still sitting in committee.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

While legislators and police often take the credit for drops in gang related crime, the ebb and flow of gangs are more susceptible to other less tangible factors.

There are several theories of why New York City has less of a problem with gangs than cities like Los Angeles and Chicago.

One is that today's gangs operate in an automobile culture that facilitates drive-by-shootings and drug dealing, and enables gangs to travel in greater anonymity. New York's mass transit system makes it more difficult for such activities. Another theory is that New York City has more opportunities for young people that fill the similar needs as a gang.

"In New York you can be part of a religious group, an arts club, a cultural group, you can even be part of a doo-wop group," said Councilmember Ken Fisher, who is Chair of the Youth Services Committee. "There are more opportunities for someone to belong to something."

There are also a host of non-profits that work with gang members on a one-to-one basis. The main challenge for these groups is to offer something that replaces the protection, identity, and money young people gain from being part of a gang.

Robert DeSena, a retired schoolteacher and founder of [Council for Unity](#) a group that works to

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bring rival gangs together says many of the gang members he meets are looking for a way out.

"Violence is exhausting and gangs realize they are unable to exterminate the opposition," said DeSena. DeSena works to build a network of protection and support that replaces gang life. The youth are responsible for running their own cultural events, support meetings, marketing the programs, soliciting members-using skills they had previously used on the street. The members are paired with alumni of the program who work as mentors, often hiring the youth to work at their companies.

"You get an ex-gang member who works for Price Waterhouse to take an interest in a kid," said DeSena, "and the kids will take notice."

OTHER LINKS:

- Gotham Gazette's NYC Books: [Gangs of New York](#)
- [Institute for Intergovernmental Research National Youth Gang Center](#) provides statistics, research, and gang information by geographic area.

- [Practical Advice](#) for taking back your neighborhood from gangs
- [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#)
- [Resources on Building a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Gangs](#)
- [Mothers Against Gang Wars](#)
- The personal Web site of [Stanley Tookie Williams](#) the Co-founder of the Crips, who, from prison, urges young people to stay out of gangs.

- [Gangwar.com](#) An online newsletter about gang history, identification, and warning signs.