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# FACULTY RESEARCH EDITION

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## THE SAVANNAH STATE COLLEGE

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# The Gang Phenomenon and Delinquency Among Adolescent Boys

By William Jimmerson Holloway

### I Introduction

A primary concern of the citizens of the United States is the menacing specter of nationwide delinquency and crime. Octopus like, it wraps its potent tentacles around all phases of community endeavor, contributing to a steady deterioration in the social fabric.

One of the most tragic aspects of the total situation is the widespread prevalence of juvenile delinquency in our country—a land so abundantly rich in material and spiritual resources. The newspaper, radio, television, and other media of communication bring us grim reminders of our feeble efforts to get at the roots of this mode of disorganization. It is a social problem of great magnitude and importance since it saps the virility and reduces the social usefulness of youth whom we need to prepare for carrying on the tremendous responsibilities of managing the affairs of one of the world's great nations.

Modern research has revealed that most delinquency among adolescents is committed in pairs or groups. This study deals with male delinquent gangs at adolescence. Its purposes are three-fold:

1. To analyze the factors leading to participation in these gangs.
2. To investigate the nature of these gangs.
3. To point out methods of rehabilitation and prevention.

For many years the field of delinquency and crime has been considered the exclusive domain of the sociologists. But the complexity of the problem and the widespread social ramifications of its consequences have led to investigations not only by sociologists, but by psychologists, psychiatrists, economists, and political scientists.

Our democratic ideology impels us to provide all of our youth with opportunities to develop into wholesome citizens endowed with wisdom and courage to make our country better for all. To attain this goal the youth who compose juvenile gangs must be given special attention. Sane programs of rehabilitation and prevention are basic essentials in this process. This study indicates some of the significant trends in these areas.

## II Factors Of Motivation

One of the basic considerations in the problem of juvenile gangs is an analysis of the factors that cause boys to become members. What are they seeking? Why is it that some boys in the same community or even in the same family become delinquent gang members and others do not? What kind of community organizational life fosters the growth of delinquent gangs?

The motives underlying the boy's participation in the delinquent activities of his gang are essentially like those observed among members of non-delinquent groups. Like the non-delinquent he is apparently motivated by those common and universal desires for recognition, approbation and esteem of his fellows, stimulation, thrill and excitement, intimate companionship, security and protection.[1]

The boy's emotional organization, which is in large measure conditioned by his family relationships, is a differentiating factor in the incidence of delinquency. Where family organization is stable and sound and the social and emotional needs are met in satisfying manners delinquency is not likely to occur. But family disorganization is a potent factor in driving youth to delinquent careers. For when the family fails to provide means for meeting the basic social and emotional needs of boys they will turn elsewhere. Healy and Bronner[2] affirm this explicitly. "It is through the lack of satisfying human relationships that feelings of inadequacy, deprivation, or thwarting are created. When these discomforts are powerfully experienced, the driving forces of wishes and desires naturally develop into urges for substitute satisfactions. When the young individual does not then find satisfactions enough in socially acceptable behavior, he may find an alternative mode of self expression through seizing upon the idea of delinquency."

The Gluecks[3] in **Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency** state that the delinquent boys studied were much more victims of parental indifference and hostility than the non-delinquents and in turn were less attached to their parents. Also they were regarded with less warmth by their brothers and sisters. They conclude that "the delinquent boys, far more than the non-delinquents, grew up in a family atmosphere not conducive to the development of emotionally well integrated, happy youngsters, conditioned to obedience to legitimate authority." Fifty-six per cent of the delinquent boys in this study were members of gangs.

[1] Luella Cole, *Psychology of Adolescence* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1940), p. 262.

[2] William Healy and Augustus F. Bronner, *New Lights On Delinquency And Its Treatment* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 20.

[3] Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1940), p. 133.

Delinquent gangs usually rise in the deteriorated, slum areas of cities. Confronted with disorganizing factors within his family circle and in the surrounding environment the boy so situated finds an easy road to anti-social activities. Cole[4] states that delinquency is fundamentally a method of securing satisfaction for normal human desires when the more socially approved avenues of expression are blocked.

In the deteriorated and disorganized areas of cities where facilities for training and supervision of boys are meager, the possibilities for the satisfaction of the boy's desires for recognition, stimulation, companionship and security are limited largely to the spontaneous and undirected play groups whose standards and activities are often delinquent in character. In many cases only by means of delinquency do boys achieve the recognition and esteem of their fellows to which they aspire.[5]

In his monumental study, **The Gang,** Thrasher summarizes the factors of decadence in community organizational life which play such significant roles in fostering the rise and growth of delinquent gangs.

> The failure of the normally directing and controlling customs and institutions to function efficiently in the boy's experience is indicated by disintegration of family life, inefficiency of schools, formalism and externality of religion, corruption and indifference in local politics, low wages and monotony in occupational activities, unemployment, and lack of opportunity for wholesome recreation. All of these factors enter into the picture of the moral and economic frontier, and coupled with deterioration in housing, sanitation, and other conditions of life in the slums, give the impression of general disorganization and decay.[6]

Thus we have confused, thwarted, emotionally distraught, energetic, insecure youth entangled in a web of family and community disorganization. Natural urges, cravings, needs, and wishes must be expressed. If the normal channels of expression are blocked, then the boy will seek other avenues. Delinquency ofttimes is the easiest accessible and the most alluring of these.

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[4]Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

[5]Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay, *Social Factors In Juvenile Delinquency* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931), pp. 191-192.

[6]Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), pp. 37-38.

# III Nature Of Gangs

The adolescent peer group plays a dynamic role in social relationships. Its significance in an adolescent's development depends in large measure upon its objectives. The peer group, whether it is a neighborhood play group, a social clique or a delinquent gang, offers the child or adolescent greater continuity in terms of time, and more understanding than he finds in most adult directed groups. Among his age mates he is regarded as a total personality while in his relationships with adult groups he is merely regarded as a person in need of some type of training by the various leaders in the community. Next to the family in childhood and probably equally with the family during adolescence, the peer group provides satisfaction of the basic urges for security in the warmth of friendship and the sense of adequacy that comes from belonging.

The gang is not necessarily a delinquent influence, but it may easily become such without proper leadership in a socially bad environment. The tendency for boys to organize themselves into some form of social grouping is characteristic of all sections of the community. Such grouping constitutes a form of primary group relations. The main differentiating criteria between delinquent and non-delinquent gangs are cultural traditions, quality of moral standards and values, and nature of activities.[7]

Sullinger[8] points out that gangs have potentialities for good or evil. But it is only when normal interests fail to be satisfied in ways harmonious with the established social mores of the community that delinquency and crime result. If their activities are properly directed these groups have possibilities of becoming valuable assets to the community. Delinquent gangs are oriented to the idealization of the criminal while the guided group life of social organizations of youth lead to the selection of models with desirable character traits. The unguided group life of delinquent gangs leads in quite the opposite direction.

From delinquent gangs boys acquire many anti-social habits: vulgarity, obscenity, drinking, gambling, truancy, stealing, purchase of stolen goods. Professor Burgess very lucidly states the effect of such activities upon the members. "The human being as a member of a social group is a specimen of it, not primarily, if at all, because of his physique and temperament but by reason of his participation in its purposes and activities. Through communication and interaction the person acquires the language, tra-

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[7]S. M. Robinson, Nathan Cohen, and Murray Sachs, "Autonomous Groups: An Unsolved Problem In Group Loyalties And Conflicts", *Journal of Educational Sociology*, XX (1948), pp. 284-290.

[8]T. Earl Sullinger, *Social Determinants In Juvenile Delinquency* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1936), pp. 62-63.

dition, standards, and practices of his groups."[9] Thus are sown the seeds which accentuate the disorganization of the individuals of the gang.

Members of delinquent gangs acquire a philosophy of life predicated upon the idealization of underworld values. They tend to interpret life in terms of a simple fatalism from a criminalistic point of view. They feel that the cards are stacked against them and resort to delinquency and crime to balance the books. This type of philosophy is manifested in a kind of courageous aggression which often leads them to foolishly place limb and life in jeopardy.

Many anti-social attitudes evolve from delinquent gangs and become a part of the social organization of the members. There are attitudes of hostility toward the police, the truant officer, and the outsider in general. Likewise attitudes develop which give sanction to gambling, stealing, purchase of stolen goods and other illicit acts. Then there is a protective and sympathetic attitude toward the criminal offender and attitudes of admiration and respect for those who have raised themselves above the general economic level of the community through participation in delinquency, crime, and racketeering.

Like conventional social groups these gangs demand rigid conformity to their codes and ideals on the part of all members. Intense loyalty, especially in face of opposition from the outside, is a marked characteristic and unifying influence of gang life.

If delinquent gangs are so fraught with peril for the individual and so antagonistic to the well being of society one is prone to inquire just what the gang offers the boy that is so powerful and compelling. This phase of the gang phenomenon now demands our attention.

The gang offers a substitute for what society fails to give and provides a welcome relief from intense supervision. It thus fills a gap and affords an escape from the general routine of life. It is distinctly a world all its own far removed from the humdrum existence of the average citizen. Life in the gang is often rough and untamed yet packed with appeal for the adventurous desires of adolescents.

The gang satisfies the boy's need for friendship. Conklin states that:

> Without a friend in whom to confide there must inevitably be much repression with tendencies to those distortions of personality which repression may effect. Friendship thus provides a means of expression, of catharsis.

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[9] Clifford Shaw, *The Jack Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), p. 187.

There is in it all of the psychological values of confession.

. . . And in like manner the intimacies and loyalties of friendship may serve to enhance and establish tendencies in one to lead and to dominate and in the other to submit and to follow.[10]

Gang life also provides the means for satisfying many of the urges or desires of youth. These include opportunity for display, for activity, for thrill, for leadership, for the consciousness of power, for a type of security, and for the approval of one's own acts and achievements.

Thrasher[11] has analyzed eight appealing and significant experiences of boys in delinquent gangs:

1. Sheer physical activity of a random sort.

2. Games and gambling affording thrill and relief from dullness and routine. (These games include Hide and Seek, Tag, Leapfrog, Horseshoes, Run-sheep-run, Fingers Down, Cops and Robbers, cards, dominoes, crapshooting, Parchesi, checkers, and Lotto.)

3. Stealing for sport as well as revenue.

4. Patronage of commercialized recreation, particularly the pool rooms and cheap movies.

5. Sports, particularly football and boxing, offering new experiences and escape from ennui. (This is a wholesome as well as popular outlet.)

6. Loafing, particularly in lulls between more exciting enterprises.

7. Use of tobacco.

8. Consumption of alcoholic beverages.

"The fundamental fact about the gang," says Thrasher[12] "is that it finds in the boys who become its members a fund of energy that is undirected and uncontrolled by any socially desirable pattern, and gives to that energy an opportunity for expression in the freest, the most spontaneous and elemental manner possible, and at the same time intensifies all the natural impulses by the process of cumulative stimulation."

In such a world of thrilling activities it can be readily seen that most of the programs of constructive youth agencies pale into insignificant tameness and drabness by comparison. Gradually the gang usurps the time given to

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[10]Edmund S. Conklin, *Principles of Adolescent Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1946), pp. 189-190.

[11]Thrasher, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-101.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 101.

school, home, and work until it becomes the primary inter-
est of the boy.

Workers with gangs must take due cognizance of the
many satisfying experiences which gangs offer and the
powerful ties which bind the boy to his gang. This is basic
in the formulation of any plans for treatment and pre-
vention.

## IV  Social Control Of Delinquent Juvenile Gangs

Since delinquent gangs of adolescents are inimical to
the best interests of the individuals involved and the larger
community group, society has taken steps to control them.
Unfortunately, we have yet to evolve satisfactory protec-
tion measures against this complex phenomenon. There is
no royal road to success in treatment and preventive proc-
esses. Our efforts in the present and future must capi-
talize upon all of the techniques that psychology, psychia-
try, and sociology can produce. So vital is this problem to
our total welfare that an "all out" program is essential.

An analysis of the process of control must logically
lead to an explosion of two "myths" currently and com-
monly held by many who work with youth. The first is
that the total destruction of the gang augurs for the best
welfare of the individuals involved and society at large.
The second is that organized recreation will prevent de-
linquency. Evidence to the contrary is heavily weighed
against these theories as will be revealed subsequently.

Reeducation of the gang members is basic in the treat-
ment process. To be effective it must be rooted in the
community with natural leaders known and respected in
the community utilized to the full. Superimposed stereo-
typed programs of recreation and group work must be re-
placed by dynamic programs which are vital and practical
to the participant. Programs of re-education must be sig-
nificant, so glamorous, so well led and so naturally estab-
lished as to be as attractive as the spontaneous activities
of the gang. As Thrasher, Chambers, Burgess, Shaw and
others who have worked successfully with gangs power-
fully urge—**the gang members themselves must be permit-
ted to do the planning and managing under proper adult
guidance.** Much of the success of rehabilitative work in
New York and Chicago has been attributed to the combina-
tion of gang and community leadership in conjunction with
trained specialists who purposely remained in the back-
ground.

Adults who work with gangs should tackle their duties
with marked humility and open-mindedness. There are no
ready made answers for any one situation. Ingenious, crea-
tive, intelligent leadership is an absolute necessity if prog-
ress is to be made in this very difficult aspect of human

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behavior and human relationships. Haydon's word of advice should become a part of the creed of all who seek to aid these youth in the process of their readjustment.

> Those who would help in such an endeavor must come down off the pedestals of professional training, superior economic status, and adulthood, and throw in their lot with those whom they seek to influence. They must leave cloistered offices and join forces with the residents on the scene of the problem. They must discard preconceived programs based on external standards to make room for adaptations to local conditions. . . . Informality must be their watchword. Their professional vanity must give way to sincerity of purpose. Only through this procedure will they be able to use their advantages in life for the common welfare. In so doing, they find out that their own re-education is just as significant as the education of others.[13]

Destruction of gangs is not the key to social control. Chambers who has worked extensively with gangs in New York City states that "experience has taught me that any attempt to break up the gang formation is doomed to failure. The sense of security the gang affords its members cannot be discounted. For its members will develop even more fear and hostility when that security is threatened. It is necessary, therefore, not to discard the gang, but build on it as a unit and redirect its energies into constructive activities."[14]

Robinson, Cohen, and Sachs warn that "in trying to break up gangs, social authorities are frequently breaking up the only medium through which the members can enjoy social relationships, thus creating a fresh problem for themselves, for human beings cannot live without social relationships.[15]

Redirecting the gang turns out to be a problem of reorientation of values and giving life positive and constructive meaning for its members. The approach must be positive—not a new chapter in the process of setting up further taboos and prohibitions. It is of far greater importance to lead them to see the meaning of what society wants them to do and its relationship to some rational scheme of life.

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[13]Edward M. Haydon, *Re-education And Delinquency*, Journal of Social Issues, I No. 3 (1945), p. 32.

[14]Bradford Chambers, "Approach To The Gang", *Survey,* 80 (1944), pp. 256-258.

[15]Robinson, Cohen and Sachs, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

Chambers makes the following suggestions to effect the rehabilitation of gangs:[16]

1.    Keep the boys' group organization and let them govern it.

2.    Form athletic clubs and civic leagues.

3.    Let members plan activities.

4.    Bring in star athletes whom they respect and idolize.

5.    Show motion pictures of collegiate and professional athletic contests.

Group leaders should be trained to use individual as well as group therapeutic techniques. For a crucial problem in working with gangs is the individual's adjustment. Scientific treatment must be in terms not only of his gang but also the family, school, church, and neighborhood. For the real problem of working with boys in delinquent gangs is to re-direct their energies into channels that will contribute to their optimum development and further the best interests of all of the other groups in the community with which they are affiliated.

Solomon[17] feels that it is nonsense to claim that recreation can cure delinquency because there are so many important aspects involved that recreation at its best cannot touch or affect. Youth commit anti-social acts for reasons quite unrelated to the whole field of recreational work.

Thrasher[18] contends that the common assumption that the problem of delinquency can be solved by multiplying playgrounds and social centers is erroneous. "The physical layout of gangland provides a realm of adventure with which no playground can compete. The real problem is one of developing in these areas or introducing into them leaders who can organize the play of the boys, direct it into wholesome channels and give it social significance."

In a report on the effect of recreation upon delinquency in selected Chicago communities McKay[19] concludes that in all areas studied delinquent boys spent more time in recreational activities than non-delinquents. Participation in organized recreation represents such a small proportion of the total life experiences of boys that benefits gained are often counteracted by the more appealing influences of other agencies.

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[16]Chambers, *op, cit.*, p. 55.

[17]Ben Solomon, "Recreation And Delinquency", *Journal Of Educational Sociology*, 21 (1948) pp. 284-290.

[18]Thrasher, *op. cit.*, p. 494.

[19]Henry D. McKay, "The Neighborhood And Child Conduct", *The Annals Of The American Academy Of Political And Social Science*, CCDXI, January 1949, p. 35.

It is a mistake to attempt to justify recreation in terms of curing delinquency as is done in so many communities. Actually, recreation needs no such justification. In the process of socialization play has a very fundamental role. It is imperative for us to provide adequate leisure time activities through which energies and creative urges are satisfied in ways consistent with prevailing societal values and mores. This should be the heritage of each child in each community. Any other procedure is derogatory to the best interests of the individual, the welfare of the community, and the democratic ideology to which we subscribe.

In the final analysis the most advantageous method of social control is through prevention. Inherent in any preventive program must be a recognition of the fundamental fact that adolescent boys have human needs, desires, and urges which must be satisfied. Any attempt to circumvent this will result merely in a superficial attack on a complex problem. Effective preventive programs like effective medical therapy must get at the basis of the problem. To this task all of the agencies working with youth should turn their attention.

Little progress can be expected in the prevention of delinquency until family life is strengthened. Parents must gain insights into the fact that their own emotional attitudes, so often unconsciously motivated, as well as the feeling life of their children, are involved in any behavior presented. What is needed is a large scale, continuous, pervasive program designed to bring to bear all of the resources of mental hygiene, social work, education and religious and ethical instruction upon the central issues involved. Healy and Bronner and the Gluecks point out that a tremendous multiplication of psychiatric, social, and educational resources for improving the basic equipment of present and prospective parents for a wholesome parental role is an indispensable necessity.

Much has been done of value by many schools to aid in the process of prevention. Much more needs to be done. The following are among the more significant and difficult preventive measures which need to be taken on a continuing basis:

1. Recognition of potential delinquents early.

2. Provision of many acceptable outlets for the emotional drives of boys.

3. Greater individualization of instruction on basis of differential abilities, social urges, and emotional needs.

4. Curricular reorganization to provide more life-related experiences for boys.

5. Provision of year round social development programs.

6. Extension and improvement of guidance services.

7. Reorganization of curricula of teacher training institutions to provide prospective teachers with more useful techniques for working with individuals and groups.

One of the boldest ventures that the school can take is to conduct a program of publicity to alert the community concerning the nature and consequences of delinquency and their responsibility for its control. For delinquency is not merely a problem for the schools but for all agencies in the community. The corollary of this would be to provide the leadership necessary for a constructive community attack on the entire problem of delinquency and crime. Thus the schools would supply a qualitative type of educational statesmanship so sorely needed in our times.

One of the newer and most promising attacks upon the problem is the creation of area projects in selected neighborhoods in New York City and Chicago. The plan represents attempts at both rehabilitation and prevention. Its main provisions are:[20]

1. **Employment of a corps of group workers whose leadership is exercised indirectly.** They gain acceptance by the gang working with them where they are, helping them locate headquarters providing individual and group guidance, and enriching their activity programs.

2. **Employment of an area coordinator to supervise the group workers and develop contacts with parents and agencies to secure their cooperation.** He is also responsible for the establishment of a council of gangs for the purpose of developing a plan of inter-group activity and cooperative relationships.

3. **Formulation of an area committee composed of representatives from the police, schools, social agencies, and businessmen.** This neighborhood committee is responsible for supervising the coordinator and coordinating the efforts of all factions in the community.

This program is highly significant for it represents an approach to the problem using the latest scientific techniques. Another primary feature is that it places high emphasis upon the participation of the residents of the neighborhood in the planning and operation of the program. And finally, it provides activities the boys like within the framework of their gang organizations to which they have become firmly attached. So although these programs are still in the experimental stages they offer a bulwark of hope for making constructive inroads upon community attempts to control delinquent adolescent gangs.

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[20]Ernest W. Burgess, Joseph D. Lohman, and Clifford Shaw, "The Chicago Area Project", *Coping With Crime* (New York: The National Probation Association, 1937), p. 10.

## V  Conclusion

Many factors contribute to the rise of juvenile delinquent gangs. Among the most significant are: (1) the blocking of natural urges, cravings, needs, and wishes; (2) family disorganization; and (3) decadence in community organizational life.

Gang life offers adolescents an unparalleled realm of adventure and helps to satisfy many of their urges, desires, and needs. The dynamic role of the adolescent peer group is a significant factor in social relationships. When these groups are delinquent the members acquire many anti-social habits and values leading to individual and group disorganization.

Prevention is the most advantageous method of social control. Rehabilitation programs for adolescents now in gangs must utilize the latest available scientific techniques with adequately trained personnel. It is significant to point out that destruction of the gang is not the key to social control and that re-education of gang members is basic in the treatment process. In order to set up an effective program of social control, a community needs to mobilize all of the resources of its youth serving agencies under stimulating, creative leadership.

The problem of reconstructing the patterns of adolescent delinquent gangs is a potent challenge facing us today. A wise social investment in money and personnel is absolutely essential if the job is to be well done and this terrific waste of human resources ended. This is a primary requisite.

What is really appalling is the lethargy and indifference to the whole problem of delinquency and crime, not merely by legally constituted authorities, but by substantial citizens all over the country. By failure to take the necessary steps to control this phenomenon we unwittingly contribute to the chaos, disorganization, and deterioration of our own society. A great "awakening" is truly in order.

Well adjusted, adequately trained, and intelligent adolescents are our best guarantees that the future policies and practices of our nation will be farsighted and wise. To see that this goal is achieved is our inescapable responsibility.