

# ORGANIZING CRIME IN THE MARGINS

*THE ENTERPRISES AND PEOPLE OF THE AMERICAN DRUG TRADE*

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*To my dad, who planned on living a lot longer than he did.*

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*SUMMARY*

This thesis studies the markets, organizations, and people involved in the American drug trade in three sites: El Paso, Phoenix, and Chicago. The multisited analysis explores the relationships that exist within each site and provides an overview of how the drug trade differs in various contexts. This study illustrates that, contrary to the rhetoric of politicians and law enforcement actors over the past decade, there is not a vast, singular criminal conspiracy that organizes the drug trade with the intent of taking over cities in the U.S. Instead, there exists a flexible network of actors that operates largely in the margins of society. These actors participate in the network for various lengths of time and supply the ongoing demand for illicit drugs and/or the protection required for such activities in various U.S. markets. These participants include street and prison gangs, transportation organizations, and other groups and individuals, who often work as subcontractors, for employers they may not know, accepting risky tasks for what they may view as a lucrative opportunity. Moreover, this study shows that settings are important in determining how actors in the drug trade behave. This study demonstrates that when the state can effectively respond to violent acts, the criminal entrepreneurs seek to minimize publicly visible acts of violence, thus shifting acts of violence from the street to places out of public view or to prisons or jails. Ultimately, context must be taken into account if policy which seeks to reduce the harms of the drug trade in terms of unwanted usage and violence are to be effectively operationalized.



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

People often ask whether I was scared talking to people who had committed all kinds of crimes or who had violent reputations. The answer is no; however, I have found writing this work terrifying. I am afraid that the reader may misread it. Almost everything that I have written about and commented on within these pages has a political connotation. I know that no matter how great my efforts, I will always bring a certain degree of bias to the recounting of what I saw, but I have tried my best to report events as neutrally as possible and to provide reasonable interpretations of problems.

In his book, *In Search of Respect*, Philippe Bourgois (2003) warns of the American audience's predilection to misread the ethnographic presentation of social marginalization. In other words, the public is inclined to interpret the problems of poor and excluded people of society as the consequence of those people's own faults. One may need a realm of experiences to critically engage with such presentations. I have been very fortunate to have a realm of experience which included exploring on my own and living in communities affected by what I am writing about first hand. I was also fortunate to learn through the stories of others. Ethnographic accounts of the socially marginalized provide a proxy to those experiences that most cannot experience first-hand.

That being said, I was not able to conduct a pure ethnography, and I do not claim that this work is one. I lived and worked with some of the people whom I interviewed, exploring their neighbourhoods and observing life as usual in these areas. I attended immigration courts extensively. But, in terms of the crimes that I discuss within these pages, I saw none of them, though I became a victim of a burglary. I see myself as taking, in addition to my role as an analyst, the role of a bard: my task is to present the stories of the people who decided to share their stories and perspectives with me.

The uncut interviews were fascinating. In fact, an unaltered account of what some of the best positioned respondents had to say could be an interesting project: "The Drug Trade in Ten Interviews," much like Howard Campbell did in his book *Drug War Zone* (2009). Instead, I have edited these perspectives and presented them within a framework that, hopefully, helps the reader understand the market dynamics of the drug trade, the organizations that engage in that market, and the people who are part of those organizations. Through these experiences, I hope, as criminologist John Hagedorn puts it, to promote "research, not stereotypes" (2015, 10), which may allow

both researcher and reader to better understand the context in which those actions occur.

Many of the names of the respondents have been changed to grant them anonymity. Sometimes, respondents picked their aliases, but when they elected not to do so or when they were respondents in court cases that I observed, I assigned them a name of my own choosing. There are no composite characters in the text; each person described is a unique, real individual. All the first-hand events described within did happen, though events I observed did not necessarily occur in the order presented. I have done my best to test historical events that were recounted to me by respondents to ensure accuracy of the claims.

The quotations within this text are either the direct words from recordings with respondents, taken always with their full consent and knowledge, or, in cases where I could not record, reconstructions of conversations from notes written during or shortly after the events occurred. Recordings were transcribed intelligently, meaning that tics, pauses, and filler phrases are excluded. I have not included these details in this text because they do not enhance comprehension or meaning. Where the respondents spoke in dialect, I have kept their speech true to what they said. I have used square brackets to clarify pronouns and slang when necessary. The quotations selected are often representative of what other respondents expressed. I have also endeavoured to include as wide array of respondent views as possible. Translations from Spanish to English are mine, as are any errors within the text.

A brief explanation about the terms used to refer to groups that traffic drugs as well as different types of gangs is necessary. The language used to describe these groups varies considerably among law enforcement practitioners, the news media, and the members of such groups. In this text, I use a mix of official and colloquial terms, particularly when the latter provides a sense of nuance that the former does not.

Finally, I realize that some readers will bring their own predispositions to the table and flatly reject some or all that I have to say. And I realize that other readers will argue that I have understated, overstated, or misrepresented the problems explored within this work. My goal has been to minimize my own prejudice so that the individuals whom I interviewed can read what I have written and say that I have understood the kernel of what they were telling me. I have great respect for the people who so kindly gave me their time and their experiences. I did my best to represent them

accurately and with the respect they deserve. It is not my intention to denigrate in any way the people whose stories make up this narrative.



## I: GETTING ORGANIZED

## ONE: A SECURITY STATE OF MIND

### *AMERICA THE MISTRUSTFUL*

Being scared and suspicious of foreign threats is a part of American history. McCarthy's Red Scare and the ongoing suspicion of communist actors throughout the Cold War are the most prominent examples of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, concerns about communism's reach have been supplanted by the threat of terrorism and unwanted eyes snooping on one's digital data. However, no matter the concern *du jour*, lurking below the surface has always been the threat of "the other," the Native Americans of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Chinese and the emancipated slaves of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Italians and Irish during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese during WWII, and, from the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century until present day, an assortment of brown people from many places of origin, including the Middle East and Latin America. Evidently, throughout American history, security has been central to several realms of study and inquiry.

In this context, American public discourse has given rise to an ever-growing list of "moral panics" and their associated "folk devils," the threats and the parties supposedly responsible<sup>1</sup> (Cohen 2002). American politicians have built, often consciously, political capital by playing into what sociologist Barry Glasner (2010) has termed a "culture of fear," scapegoating a group of people, often minority populations (Chambliss 1995), and exploiting the resulting public concern by offering rhetoric – and sometimes, though not always, action – that claims to present the panacea that secures against the threat in question. Whether the rhetoric is grounded in empirical fact is often irrelevant, particularly when potential political gain or loss is in the balance (Edelman 2001). How politicians and policymakers speak about and act against the people and organizations involved in the drug trade illustrates this phenomenon: from the South American farmers who produce coca leaves to Mexican wholesalers to

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<sup>1</sup> Moral panics are wide ranging. In their book on the subject, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2010, ix-x) provide a good, though non-exhaustive, list of panics which include: "crime, child molestation and priestly pedophilia, extraterrestrials, terrorism, flag desecration, illegal aliens, crack cocaine, designer drugs, Ecstasy, raves, video 'nasties,' gangsta-rap, horror comics, alien abductions, the 'Red Scare,' the white slave traffic, conspiracies, and satanic ritual abuse and murder in day care centers."



American street corner dealers and their clients, all have remained enduring folk devils in the past fifty years within the American public discourse on illegal drugs.

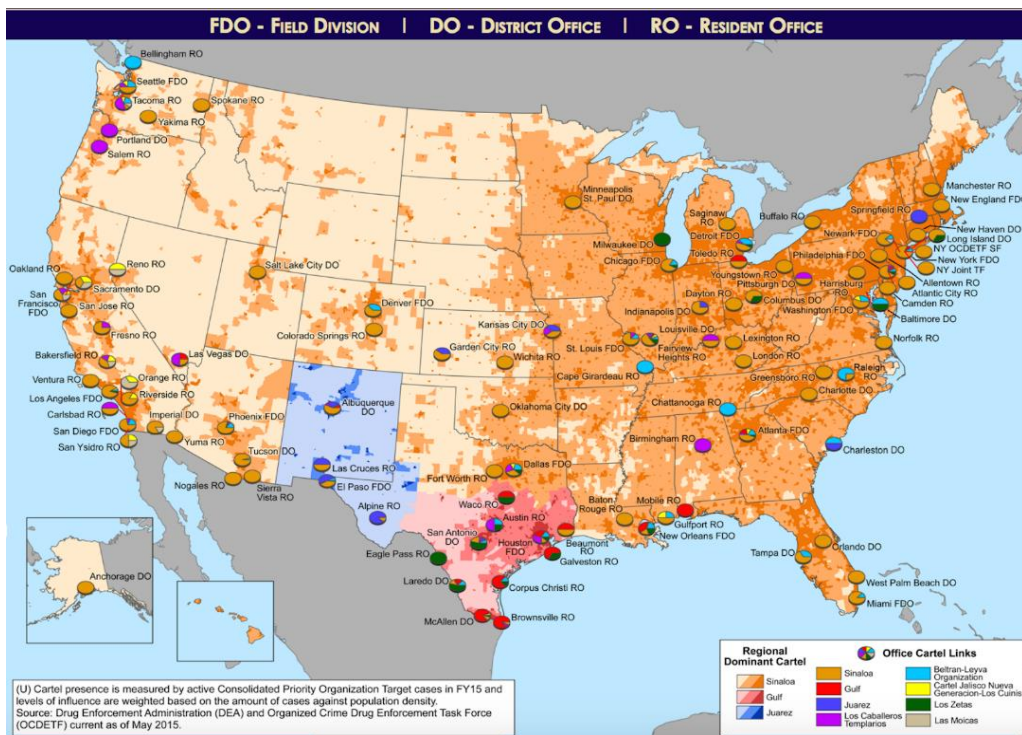
### *PANIC ABOUT THE DRUG TRADE*

The criminalization of recreational drugs began during the 1930s when Harry Anslinger (Kinder and Walker 1986, Anslinger and Cooper 1937), the first commissioner of the U.S. Treasury Department's Federal Bureau of Narcotics, reported on the "harms" of marijuana. Subsequently, criminalization escalated with Richard Nixon's declaration of the infamous "War on Drugs" (Frontline 2000) in 1971, and Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, together with her husband's presidential administration in the 1980s. This prohibitionist position has problematized the drug trade for the American public often in a simple, unnuanced way: drugs, and the people who sell and use them, are bad (Carey 2014, Miller 1996). In the decades following Nixon's declaration of a War on Drugs, in the U.S. alone, federal and state governments have spent over a trillion (\$1,000,000,000,000) dollars and counting in a fruitless attempt to "win" this "war" (Associated Press 2010). The media have consistently covered the war on drugs since its inception (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009), spinning tales of out of control users, evil dealers, and the brave souls who fight against the scourge of drugs (Miller 1996). Policymakers, in turn, use such coverage to justify the policies which contribute to the burgeoning incarceration rate in the U.S. (Blumstein and Beck 1999).

Since the mid-2000s, policymakers and law enforcement have focused particularly on Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) – colloquially known as drug cartels. Various media outlets have claimed that Mexican DTOs are flooding the U.S. with heroin (among a litany of other drugs), leading to an epidemic of opioid abuse (Popovich 2016, Szalavitz 2016), while expanding their organizational apparatus into the U.S. and taking control of the local drug markets (Drug Enforcement Administration 2015b, Cherney 2014), which may result in violence (Lippert, Cattani, and Parker 2013, Aguilar 2016, 2013, McKinley Jr. 2009).

Perhaps the most notorious DTO of the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the Sinaloa Federation, the organization once led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. Prior to Guzmán's 2016 arrest and extradition to the U.S. (Vulliamy 2016, Ahmed 2017), events which postdate the fieldwork that informs this thesis, law enforcement at several levels primarily blamed the Sinaloa Federation for much of the U.S. drug trade (Dumke 2014), despite the presence of a wide array of DTOs in Mexico (Kan 2012, Grillo

2011, Shirk 2009), where, starting in 2008, competition resulted in years of heavy bloodshed (Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015, Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, Shirk 2009, 2011, Ríos and Shirk 2011). A map published by the DEA in 2015 (see: Figure 1) illustrates that there are several Mexican cartels supplying the U.S. drug markets (Drug Enforcement Administration 2015b). The accompanying report also indicates that, like patterns described in the Matrix report on the UK illicit drug trade (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007), Mexican DTOs subcontract smaller groups to transport and distribute their product within the United States (Drug Enforcement Administration 2015a). Moreover, such subcontracting indicates that Mexican DTOs do not transplant themselves. In other words, a DTO does not relocate and continue to “offer criminal protection over a sustained period of time outside its region of origin and routine operation” (Varese 2006, 414).



**Figure 1: United States: Areas of Influence of Major Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations, 2015. (Source: DEA)**

Nonetheless, the public discourse focuses on the role of drug cartels and the violence they may perpetuate while portraying unauthorized immigrants as agents of the drug trade, responsible for the expansion of cartels which “control” the drug markets of various U.S. cities, despite little evidence for this theory. When I started this project, politicians were alarmed that some of the safest cities in the U.S. are only a bridge crossing away from cities plagued by the worst of Mexico’s violence (Aguilar and Ura 2016, Montoya 2015), for example, El Paso, Texas, and Juárez, Chihuahua

(Campbell 2009, Jusidman de Bialostozky et al. 2008, Jaimes and Robles 2005, Bowden 2010).

The anxiety about Mexican DTOs extended to cities beyond the border. In Phoenix, Arizona, which lies less than 200 miles north of Nogales, a spate of kidnappings was initially blamed on the drug cartels (U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General 2012, Thoreson et al. 2011). In Chicago, Illinois, some 1,500 miles north of Juárez, the Chicago Crime Commission declared Chapo Guzmán as “Public Enemy Number 1,” and Jack Reilly, the former head of the DEA’s Chicago division, identified the Sinaloa Cartel as the driving force behind the gang violence in the city (Dumke 2014, Elgas 2015).

The prevalence and visibility of violence related to the drug trade in Mexico allowed those moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963) who frame the public narrative to fuse the two issues of drug use and drug-trade-related violence. Conflating the issue of drug abuse with the issue of violence is an effective tactic that law enforcement and anti-drug crusaders have used throughout the “war on drugs” to justify the continued expenditure against drug users and petty dealers (Miller 1996). To that end, American politicians and policymakers often linked the drug trade, one of the ever-present threats in the past fifty years, not only to unauthorized immigrants and their role in moving and dealing drugs but also to the funding of terrorism (Makarenko 2004, Payan 2006, Celaya Pacheco 2009).

These positions have sustained two rhetorical tropes. First, there is the resurgence of the “Alien Conspiracy Theory,” which asserts that foreign criminals are invading the innocent shores of the U.S., bringing with them criminality previously unknown to the U.S. (Morselli, Turcotte, and Tenti 2011, Smith Jr 2016, Woodiwiss 2001, Smith Jr 1976, Hobbs 1998). Second, there is what anthropologist Leo Chavez calls the “Latino Threat Narrative,” which demonizes unauthorized Latino immigrants by associating them with criminality and societal adulteration, while simultaneously refusing to recognize the characteristics within society that create demand for their labour<sup>2</sup> (Chavez 2008, 25). These narratives establish stereotypes that mischaracterize

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<sup>2</sup> An example of such rhetoric includes Donald J. Trump’s incendiary comment on the 2016 presidential campaign trail in which he said: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. [...] They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those

the component parts of the drug trade and allow people, who legal scholar Robert Bennet (2003) calls “conversational entrepreneurs,” to set the terms of the public agenda, influencing how public policy unfolds and how the public at large evaluates the actors of the drug trade, which, at their worst, are couched in terms of the bogeymen of “organized crime.”

### *ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE DRUG TRADE: ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS, OR BEYOND?*

To combat misleading narratives, analysts and academics need a better understanding of the mechanics of the drug trade. The public concern provides a starting point; ignoring it would be a failure to address it. To that end, if the drug trade is to be problematized in a meaningful way, policymakers must understand what analysts and practitioners mean and what the public understands by “organized crime” (Roth 2010). Accordingly, stakeholders interested in affecting positive change in the context of the drug trade must understand the actors involved, particularly given the focus on Mexican DTOs and gangs, the threats they may pose beyond simply serving up drugs, and how they interact with each other. Moreover, to provide effective responses to tangible problems, policymakers need to understand the local contexts which underwrite the local illicit markets (Hobbs 1998). Additionally, as violence remains ever-present in the drug narrative, and a characteristic that – for right or often wrong – is frequently associated with organized criminal groups, analysts must examine the true presence and use of violence throughout the illicit supply chain (Reuter 1983, 2009).

“Organized crime,” with prohibition-era mafia syndicates often serving as a basis for the popular image that the term conjures today, has been an area of great concern particularly since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Woodiwiss 2001). Despite such prolonged law enforcement attention to “organized crime,” the term lacks a clear, uncontested definition (van Duyne 1995, Von Lampe 2016, 2008). Within academic and policy circles alike, the concept alternates between two rivalling notions: “a set of stable organizations illegal per se or whose members systematically engage in crime; and a set of serious criminal activities, particularly the provision of illegal goods and

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problems with them. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Lee 2015).

services, mostly carried out for monetary gain” (Paoli 2014, 2). Simply put, the divide is between understanding organized crime in terms of a set of activities or a particular organizational structure, be it an association or a network, and the stability of the connections therein (Levi et al. 2013).

Law enforcement typically focuses on specific organizations and criminal actors, in part due to the concrete nature of the stated enemy; when a notorious person or organization falls, law enforcement can claim success in a way that the public can tangibly grasp (Chambliss 1994, Bayley 1996). That government and law enforcement focus on organizations in the problematization of “organized crime” is apparent in Article 2 of the *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime* wherein an “organized criminal group” is defined “as a structured group of three or more persons existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses in accordance with this Convention in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or material benefit” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2004, 5).

Such a wide definition is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) definition can include far too many groups, making analysis of “organized crime” clunky and imprecise, particularly when large data sets or comparisons are involved (Levi et al. 2013). On the other hand, the definition does not “limit its attention to hierarchically structured ‘mafia-type organizations’” (Roth 2010, 11), thereby allowing researchers and practitioners to move on from the ethnic tropes of the past and think about an array of other criminal groups that participate in “organized criminal activities.” In the context of the drug trade, such organizations include DTOs and street and prison gangs.

The criminal actors of the drug market can be split roughly into users and their suppliers. Though some users are also suppliers, end users are mostly excluded from the construction of “organized crime,” which tends to focus on the suppliers. The suppliers that most readily come to mind in the drug trade are arguably drug trafficking organizations, street gangs, and dealers unaffiliated with street gangs (Bunker and Sullivan 2013, Sullivan and Bunker 2002, Fagan 1989, Bourgois 2003, Venkatesh 2008, Adler 1993, Fleisher 2015). The former two groups generate the most concern in the public discourse because both are associated with heinous violence (Stevens, Bewley-Taylor, and Dreyfus 2009, Castillo, Mejía, and Restrepo 2013, Lauger 2012, Hazen and

Rodgers 2014) and both are accused of being part of a broader organized criminal conspiracy to supply drugs to the U.S. and beyond (Dumke 2013, 2014).

Mexican DTOs, and their Colombian predecessors, have well-deserved reputations for violence and massive death tolls in their countries of origin where competition with other criminal actors is stiff (Wolf 2015, Grayson 2010, Dickenson 2012, Snyder and Durán Martínez 2009, Beittel 2009, Morris 2011, Williams 2012, Beittel 2013, Sullivan 2010, Stevens, Bewley-Taylor, and Dreyfus 2009, Castillo, Mejía, and Restrepo 2013, Villarreal 2002, Freeman 2006, Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015, Ríos and Shirk 2011). Over the past decade, in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, certain street and prison gangs have become the “armed branches” of DTOs, engaging in enforcement on their behalf. Some, by using ruthless tactics to carve out their corner of the drug market, have supplanted DTOs, becoming the primary traffickers in certain areas (Grillo 2016, Wainwright 2016, Manwaring 2011, 2007). Despite decreasing violence in the U.S., gang-related violence remains a concern. One concern is that Central American gangs will migrate north and bring their violence with them (Aguilar 2016, Wainwright 2016). Another is the ongoing violence in the streets of Chicago that, in recent years, makes the city buck the national trend (Fessenden and Park 2016, Chicago Tribune 2016).

The violence undertaken by DTOs and gangs alike may be associated with the competition of criminal entrepreneurs who struggle to assert a monopolistic position in the illicit marketplace, particularly where government control is weak, such as in Mexico and Central America (Schelling 1971, IISS 2008, Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015). However, in the U.S., where law enforcement is relatively more effective, violence is infrequently employed and typically has a more nuanced role. Actors positioned at the wholesale level and higher levels of retail appear to use violence judiciously to maintain discipline or punish unforgivable violations (Reuter and Haaga 1989, Trammell 2012, Skarbek 2014). Moreover, the presence of violence does not mean that a group is engaging in “organized crime.” Criminologist Scott Decker and colleagues (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998) showed that street gangs – with the notable exception of Chicago’s Gangster Disciples – don’t exhibit the longevity associated with successful organized criminal enterprises. Thus, violence is not a characteristic which remains constant throughout the drug trade and is not an attribute that can be used to define whether a given actor or organization is engaging in organized crime. Nonetheless, as this work indicates, the presence or absence of

violence in each situation reflects the norms that either the state or criminal entrepreneurs impose over a given space and situation.

Historically, only a few so-called “farm-to-arm” suppliers have held vertical control on every step of the production, transportation, and dealing of drugs (DeVito 2005, Grayson 2010). Accordingly, rather than focusing on suppliers *en masse*, or trying to determine whether an organization is of the “organized criminal” variety, it may be better to consider criminal actors as they participate in the product supply chain, defined as “an integrated manufacturing process wherein raw materials are converted into final products, then delivered to customers” (Beamon 1998, 282). Though this definition is for supply chains that serve licit markets, it is applicable to illicit supply processes. Given the plurality of actors that converge in the illicit drug supply chain, each actor can be seen as a participant in a step of an overall process, whose goal is to supply a customer with a product. At the same time, each actor is not necessarily organizationally tied to another participant who may or may not be the same in a future transaction.

Consequently, focusing on specific organizations and their characteristics provides limited insight into the mechanics of the drug trade over time and space. Since the War on Drugs began, many actors that have participated in the drug trade have come and gone, being replaced by newer organizations that adapt from the failures of their predecessors (Durán Martínez 2015a, Thoumi 1999, Rabasa and Chalk 2001, Carpenter 2005, Felbab-Brown 2009, Garay-Salamanca, de León-Beltrán, and Salcedo-Albarán 2010, Shirk 2009, Reuter and Haaga 1989). Market demand, rather than any specific group, determines the existence and “health” of the drug trade (MacCoun and Reuter 2001). Additionally, longevity is affected by how successfully the actors with the necessary resources to perpetuate the drug trade collaborate (Morselli 2009).

Accordingly, though this study examines existing organizations to provide concrete examples in its analysis of the drug trade, its focus is to understand how different actors and organizations not only relate to each other but also coalesce to service the local, national, and transnational illicit drug markets. This strategy, at first glance, situates this work in the second camp of “organized crime” analysis which focuses on networks and the processes they facilitate rather than the organizations involved in these processes *per se*. The “drug trade” is not merely an illicit market for drugs; it also involves other criminal endeavours, such as providing protection, disposing of the proceeds of the drug sales, trafficking weapons, corrupting law

enforcement, and other criminal activities which aid in the maintenance or advancement of the criminal enterprise (Buerger 1992, Mares 2005, van Duyne and Levi 2005, McCoy 2003, Esparza and Weigend 2015).

### **The Settings, Events, and Sequences of the Drug Trade**

Criminologist Marcus Felson argues that to understand organized crime, one must go beyond examining it in terms of networks and consider “specific and tangible *events*, their specific *sequences*, and their specific *settings*” (Felson 2006, 8). By engaging in a multi-sited evaluation of the drug trade in the U.S., this work takes Felson’s cue and attempts to gauge how settings affect the way that different events within the drug trade unfold, while emphasizing the importance of local context. To that end, this study demonstrates that the social processes that facilitate the organized criminal transactions that occur in the illicit drug marketplace are not only underwritten by “a set of serious criminal activities,” but also influenced by the ordinary, licit relationships that individuals may have in their local settings. These relationships influence the illicit realm and how criminal actors interact.

By examining these local dynamics in three distinct metropolitan areas, I echo criminologist Dick Hobbs’s finding that, “Trading relationships between coalitions of criminals of different national origins involves a coagulation of local interests” (Hobbs 1998, 408). Moreover, I extend that view to coalitions of criminals of different geographical origins in the same country, particularly a country that is as large and diverse as the United States. Additionally, I show, consistent with Peter Reuter and John Haaga’s (1989) findings, that moving up in the ranks within the illicit drug marketplace to become a high-level retail dealer is possible with a bit of luck and little violence. However, unlike the retail market which requires relatively little social capital to enter, becoming involved in the wholesale market requires significant social capital in the form of interpersonal relationships with either a wholesaler or a wholesale transporter. Such relationships become less likely the farther one is from the border or transnational immigrant communities.

### **Understanding Markets: A Strategy for Analysing the Drug Trade**

Dwight C. Smith, Jr., in his book *The Mafia Mystique* (1975), suggests that the focus on “organized crime” should be framed as a focus on “illicit enterprise,” or the business of crime. He once said to me that if I understood the markets in which illicit enterprises were competing, I could then understand the people in those markets. This



advice has informed my strategy for analysis. Many scholars have focused on illicit enterprise to understand the political economy of crime (Chambliss 1975), namely, the ongoing processes which may not be dependent on the longevity of the actors involved at any given point in time and which help illustrate the role the state plays in affecting the market dynamics that underwrite the criminality (Antonopoulos 2016, Woodiwiss 2001).

This thesis examines the relationships between the people and the social organization of the drug trade through the lens of the protection market in each of the three field sites. It maintains that protection is the fundamental element that is required to further illicit enterprise (Varese 2011a). Protection is a commodity that both licit (state actors) and criminal entrepreneurs (criminal organizations) compete to control (Varese 2001, Snyder and Durán Martínez 2009, Skaperdas 2001, Gambetta 1993). The protection market underwrites the behaviours of the actors involved in the drug trade in terms of both offender and law enforcement, though how the protection market operates in different locations is dependent on the local setting, which in turn directly affects how sequences unfold during the events which underpin the illicit drug trade.

By studying the protection market, this thesis also examines how the different actors who compete in that market affect social control, building on Donald Black's (1983) ideas of crime as social control. Namely, when there is a void of state-underwritten social control in the margins of society where the drug trade operates, the market dynamics of the drug trade generate rules that, when followed, lead to successful illicit enterprise. Accordingly, those rules are passed down through the supply chain, affecting regional distributors – prison and street gangs – particularly in the American southwest. Criminally executed social control and criminally underwritten transactions are a function of the inefficiency of the state to back up its authority via formal and effective control mechanisms (Thomson 1995, 1996, Varese 2001), which usually include the military or law enforcement. In other words, when state-provided protection is thin or ineffective, criminal entrepreneurs find an opening which they can exploit for criminal gain (Block and Chambliss 1981, Milhaupt and West 2000); however, the magnitude of that criminal gain can vary (van Duyne 2010, Levi et al. 2013).

In Mexico, where the state struggles to impose effective control, violence is a relatively commonplace tool which criminal actors use. Yet, in the U.S. where state law enforcement responds relatively well to violent events, criminal actors use violence

discreetly; consequently, prison gangs discourage visible displays over petty conflicts, particularly in the American southwest, since such displays can negatively affect the illicit enterprises' bottom line. Despite the seemingly clear economic incentives to minimize violence to maximize profit, Illinois prison gangs are largely unable to affect social control in the streets of Chicago; and this failure appears to be a contributing factor to the ongoing violence in the city.

Yet, there remains the question as to why anyone accepts the risks of entering the drug trade. The answer reflects the notion of protection both in personal security and financial terms. Those who enter the drug trade believe that the drug trade offers financial gains which will allow them to live their lives as they wish, especially when compared to what the straight society offers to people like them.

### *FOCUSING ON THE DRUG TRADE THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS*

As the late journalist Charles Bowden, who spent much of his career following the drug violence and those who perpetuated it and were victim to it in the Juárez area, once warned, "If you ask the wrong questions, you will get the wrong answers." This study attempts to ask reasonable questions regarding the drug trade in the U.S. and to determine what the answers are, thereby fulfilling, as sociologist Michael Burawoy (2005) suggests, the goal of social science research which is to influence both the public's understanding of society and policy.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the body of literature that examines the drug trade in the United States from the wholesaler to the street, by examining different local contexts and seeing how each differs not only in terms of local drug dealing but also in relation to the larger, national drug trafficking operations in the United States. By understanding the processes that underpin the drug trade and the relationships that form the various markets that are in play, it asks and answers questions that will help frame the discourse surrounding the drug trade in a way that is meaningful to both policymakers and the public. Thus, I have sought to present my findings in an easily accessible manner, avoiding jargon and complex constructions wherever possible.

The goal in writing an E.P. Thompson (1966) inspired "history from below" (at least mostly so) was to present the drug trade from a perspective unvarnished and unfiltered by the interpretations of pundits, bureaucrats, and policy analysts whose experiences rarely took them close to the marginalized communities and disenfranchised people they considered to be a pernicious scourge of society. Indeed, this work was developed by my direct interaction with the people of El Paso, Phoenix,

and Chicago, three communities which prominently featured in the national discourse around the time I began to evaluate the drug trade from the bottom up. Moreover, a history from below helps illuminate the nuances of the social organization of the drug trade in a way that a top-down approach cannot, due to the difficulty in consistently accessing the highest positioned actors in large criminal enterprises. Additionally, looking at the drug trade from the bottom up allowed me to gauge how easy or difficult it is for those who participate in the drug trade to move up in the business, given the considerations and obstacles individuals face in maintaining or improving their station within the social order of the illicit drug marketplace. To that end, I was able to document the relationships between the different actors who participate in the drug trade and how each contributes, and responds, to its social organization.

I strove to learn the relevant questions I needed to ask respondents in order to get good answers. By examining three sites, I came to recognize which elements of the drug trade were similar among the three sites and which parts of the overarching rhetoric regarding the drug trade did not apply. Notably, by speaking to actors who were currently or formerly involved in the drug trade, it was possible to explore themes that better guided my understanding of what I was examining, rather than making assumptions based on research undertaken in different environments elsewhere. Accordingly, I built upon the knowledge I gained from interviews along the way to ask better, more direct questions, which resulted in comparable narratives among my respondents throughout my field sites.

While this project initially started by considering the role only Mexican DTOs play in the U.S. drug trade, it soon became clear that the illicit drug supply chain is complex. The drug trade involves a variety of actors, including transporters, prison gangs, street gangs, and individuals, all who fit in at various stages of the drug trade. The relationships between the drug trade and these organizations, and the actors within them, were not always clear. What unfolded was a study of the protection and social control, which operate within the margins of society and underpin the drug trade as we know it, and which the government struggles to undermine.

Four principal questions emerged from my study: What kinds of organizations and less formal networks participate in the U.S. drug trade? How do those organizations participate and interact? Who makes up those organizations? And what are the relationships between those organizations and the people within them? In evaluating the answers to these questions, this study considers the different settings, events, and

their sequences that constitute the drug trade (Felson 2006), providing nuance to a problem which is often considered at a macro level from a policy standpoint. This study also explores the social interactions that underpin how the drug trade is organized, not only in overarching terms to the entire market but also in terms to the organizations and actors which participate in the market and the relationships that bring independent actors, such as small time drug dealers and drug users, into the fold. Moreover, this work contributes to our understanding of the individuals who become drug smugglers, what, if any, organizations they pertain to, and how they operate (Bagley and Rosen 2015, Lupsha and Schlegel 1980, Carey 2014, Decker and Chapman 2008, Chin and Zhang 2015, McCoy 2003, Campbell 2005, Fleetwood 2011, Desroches 2007, Fleetwood 2014, Adler 1993). It also examines how transnational criminal organizations expand their operations and migrate or fail to do either (Varese 2006, 2011b, a, Morselli, Turcotte, and Tenti 2011, Arsovska 2015, Calderoni et al. 2016).

In short, this thesis, at its heart, is a comparative study of the social organization of the drug trade as it exists in El Paso/Juárez, Phoenix, and Chicago. The comparative case study design allows for an examination of how location, domestic considerations – including local drug use, gang structures, and law enforcement priorities – affect the social order of the drug trade which in turn affects the dynamics of local drug markets and how people participate in the national and/or transnational drug trade.

Consequently, this study contributes to the understanding of several key themes within the context of the drug trade, including the role of drug trafficking organizations and gangs in the drug trade, the role of violence in the drug trade, and the dynamics of the criminal market. By examining these themes, this thesis confirms and expands upon previous research and provides a basis upon which future research can examine the mechanics of other illicit market places and draw points of comparison.

#### *A LOOK AHEAD: DECONSTRUCTING RHETORIC AND EXAMINING EMPIRICS*

This thesis is divided into four sections. The first one provides the background and method to this research. The other three are based upon the three field sites and explore the themes of protection, the organizations which are part of the drug trade, and the people involved. Each chapter builds upon the previous one; however, I do not seek to make a direct, point-by-point comparison. Throughout, I provide the necessary

context so that a reader who is unfamiliar with any of these places can understand enough of each place to relate to the people whose stories I recount.

Chapter Two demonstrates how in a relatively short time I created common ground with my respondents, particularly those with a criminal past, in order to delve into their histories. I gained access to several individuals who were currently or formerly involved in criminal activity. Although long-term ethnographies which provide rich and deep data and statistical surveys which provide superficial but broad data tend to be the standards used in this kind of research, both are costly. My methods indicate that a hybrid approach which provides an intermediate portrait with relatively few resources is possible.

Section II examines the drug trade on the U.S.-Mexico border, where, despite being two sides of the same coin, there is a great difference in the visible violence from one side to the other. Chapter Three tackles the rhetoric of unauthorized immigrants and their supposed role in the drug trade. This chapter recounts my observations from immigration courts in Texas, Arizona, and Colorado and shows that respondents who are deported for drug-related crimes appear rarely in the day-to-day hearings of these courts. Most of the people who appear in immigration court do not have a history with the drug trade, save those who allege being harassed by criminal organizations in their countries of origin. The proceedings of immigration court indicate that a disconnect exists between what the U.S. expects and projects as being the provision of protection in countries like Mexico and what that provision of protection is.

Chapter Four provides a history of the drug trade in Mexico within the context of the liberalization of the Mexican state which began in the late 1970s. Building on the works of Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán Martínez (2009) and Nathan P. Jones (2016), I argue that when the state liberalized, so too did the protection markets. Consistent with the views of Charles Tilly (1985) and Diego Gambetta (1993) on the role of protection, I indicate that the liberalization of protection markets allowed criminal actors to compete within the market, giving rise to stronger criminal organizations that have increasingly and consistently used violence to affect control, and this violence marks a stark departure from the past arrangements whereby corruption facilitated illicit enterprise rather than violence. This new “business as usual” in terms of the Mexican wholesale drug trade, where violence is not effectively controlled by the state, means that criminal enterprises compete with each other as well as with the state for the protection necessary to further their business interests. This competitive nature of

the wholesale drug market has led to the protracted and sustained presence of violence in Mexico.

Chapter Five describes the role of prison gangs in the drug trade. Shortly after reaching El Paso, I learned that prison gangs provided the most direct link between the wholesale drug trade and the local market. This chapter describes the birth and development of the Barrio Azteca prison gang, a history which has never before been recounted, from the point of view of its founder, José Rivera. Barrio Azteca was one of the major parties in the proxy war that fuelled the massive loss of life that Juárez experienced in the late 2000s and early 2010s and was also a conduit for wholesale trafficking into the U.S. Additionally, this chapter demonstrates the role of protection in the prison gang structure and illustrates how prison gangs replicate the protection mechanisms while facing constraints similar to those Mexican DTOs confronted.

Chapter Six explores the drug trade from the view of the street at the U.S.-Mexico border. It shows that despite the rhetoric that the border is a “war zone,” El Paso has a minimal level of violence connected with the drug trade. By adding to the work undertaken by economist David Skarbek (2014, 2012), this chapter also shows that, similar to what he noted in California, prison gangs impose a form of social control on street gangs in El Paso, thereby reducing the amount of visible violence the city experiences. The degree of social control that prison gangs employ support Dwight C. Smith’s adage that the markets dictate the organizations’ and their actors’ behaviour. To that end, this chapter explores how the drug trade unfolds on the border and how the transnational connections that individuals have play an important role in accessing the wholesale drug market itself. The examination of settings and sequences indicates that local context matters. Trans-border, interpersonal relationships are a facet of life for many families on either side of the border. They influence the nature of the illicit relationships cultivated, established, and maintained across and along the border in a way which is distinct from relationships that develop away from the frontier.

Section III shifts the geographical focus to Phoenix. Here, I continue to evaluate the rhetorical claims made about Mexican DTOs and focus on what the drug trade looks like as it moves away from the border. Chapter Seven discusses the Phoenix-area drug trade and demonstrates that the relationships that facilitated the drug trade in El Paso are less likely to characterize the wholesale drug trade in Phoenix; as relationships decay, fewer illicit entrepreneurs have direct access to the wholesale market. Moreover, this chapter shows that protection manifests itself strategically, given that

many drug distributors and dealers rely on delivery systems or vouching systems to give potential clients access to the point of sale, often a private house. As drug dealing moves away from the street, the use of violence by street or prison gangs becomes less effective as a tool to affect control.

Chapter Eight illustrates how the shifting provisions of protection and control affect the business relationships among the various organizations that engage in the wholesale and street-level drug trade in the greater Phoenix area. It shows that when business is good, conflict and violence are low, and criminal organizations do not interrupt the status quo by employing violence which would immediately draw scrutiny to their criminal operations, which, in turn, would increase the cost and risk of doing business and decrease profit margins.

The final section examines one of sociology's favourite laboratories: Chicago. Sociologists have scrutinized Chicago perhaps more than any other city in the world, with countless studies, on an array of topics, emanating from it. These past studies provide a wealth of knowledge that helps to inform the lessons I have learned about the drug trade. In addition, Chicago is a city with a rich history of illicit entrepreneurs who have peddled booze, drugs, and votes, among other commodities throughout the years. The history of gangs in Chicago indicates that the struggle to carve out a place in society and to enjoy protection when the state apparatus fails to provide adequate security is a struggle that has existed for well over a century. Nonetheless, Chicago remains an example of how what happens in Chicago is not indicative of the social world in general, even in the U.S. Chapter Nine shows that Chicago, as one agent put it, "is its own animal." Certain elements, such as decay, are evident in the relationships among actors operating within the Chicago area drug trade. Compared to El Paso and Phoenix, Chicago presents important differences, including the weakness of prison gangs and their inability to affect social control in the street, which change the dynamic of the street trade.

Chapter Ten argues that this study shows that illicit enterprises, regardless of where they operate, by adjusting for local considerations, can use the space afforded to them at the margins of society to take advantage of the state's inefficiencies in providing protection. The three sites indicate that how the various criminal actors manage the criminally dominated protection that underwrites the drug trade depends upon an array of factors that are predicated upon the ability of higher-level organizations to impose social control onto lower-level organizations and their

members. Navigating those spaces can be tricky, given there is no overarching power to effectively provide guidance as to the rules of the protection game. Accordingly, any individual who goes into the drug trade faces a lot of risk. Despite the long odds, those who enter dream big, and that very dream contributes to the longevity of the drug trade, even as its component parts – the actors – come and go through a revolving door which is present regardless the location. Ultimately, wherever it may be, those who decide to become part of the drug trade accept its risk as being part of the struggle to survive in the margins of society that they wish to escape.



## TWO: LOOKING UNDER WATER

### *IN THE 'HOOD FOR THE FIRST TIME*

In the Spring of 2001, my father, a psychiatrist, was looking for work, so I offered to drive him to his interviews. The first was in East St. Louis, Illinois, a place known for its violence (Johnson, 2015). After I dropped my dad off at the hospital for his interview, I started looking for a gas station. When I went to fuel my car, I noticed that there was no credit card reader on the pump, so I figured I could just pump my gas and then pay the clerk. I put the nozzle into my fuel tank, selected the fuel grade, and squeezed the handle. Nothing happened. I went inside the gas station to ask the clerk, who was sitting behind a Plexiglas window, what was wrong and, if the pump was broken, where the closest gas station would be. Package liquor and cigarettes featured prominently behind and around her.

“You ain’t from around here, huh baby?” asked the clerk, a bubbly, heavysset black woman in her twenties.

“No, I’m from Springfield.”

“What brings you here?” she asked me. She seemed surprised that a teenager from upstate was in her gas station.

“My dad has an interview at the hospital, and I brought him down. I just wanted to fill up the tank. I tried to, but the gas wouldn’t pump.”

“Well, you have to pay first. Then you pump your gas. How much do you want to put in?”

“I don’t know; I really wanted to fill it up for the drive home. What do you think? Twenty-five?” I had absolutely no idea how much a full tank would cost. “Start there, and if I need more I can put more on.”

With my twenty-five dollars spent, I checked the fuel gauge again. The tank wasn’t full, but there was enough gas to return home.

The interview over, my dad, with the hospital administrator, came out to meet me. I asked the administrator about the violence in East St. Louis. After all, the tales of shootings and violence were all that I knew about the place.

“It’s gotten a lot better recently. We’re down to one shooting victim a week. When I got here a few years ago, we had at least one almost every day.”

My dad’s second interview was at a state prison in Gary, Indiana, another of the most violent cities in the country (Johnson, 2015). The trip took us through Chicago. On

the way home, my dad fell asleep. I had never driven from Gary to Springfield and, with no map or GPS, I was relying on him for directions. I took a wrong exit and ended up driving into the south side of Chicago. It was as run down as East St. Louis, and I knew I was in the wrong place. Fortunately, my dad woke up as I stopped for a light. He looked around and asked me where we were, somewhat in a panic. I wasn't sure, and I wasn't sure how to go back.

"Why don't I just pull over and ask for directions," I suggested as dusk fell.

"No, son. Don't pull over here. It's not safe. Just keep going," my dad said, clearly alarmed at the part of town in which we were. We eventually hit a street that my father was familiar with and we got back on the road home.

Thirteen years later, during another cold and icy winter, I found myself once again in the more notorious parts of Chicago, but this time by design. I had been to seedy ends of cities occasionally, but this time I would be spending a significant amount of time in them. I knew that, in doing my fieldwork, there would be a degree of risk and that my father would be worried, particularly because, as an outsider, the only stories he had heard about Chicago's south side involved violence.

Truth be told, I travelled mostly unscathed through these neighbourhoods that my father preferred to avoid even while driving. The fears my father had were not matched by my experiences as a researcher. Yes, I got burgled once, but I was physically unharmed throughout it all. It was never as scary as some people might imagine a trip to the poor parts of a city to be. At worst, I was treated with indifference, at best with concern for my wellbeing, just like the bubbly gas clerk of East St. Louis. For the most part, I was just another man on the streets, minding my own business, and when confronted with potentially dangerous situations, I made decisions that left me unscathed.

#### *COMMISSIONING: PREPARING FOR FIELDWORK*

One winter day in Cardiff, I found myself sitting in a basement classroom. The occasion? I had to answer some concerns about my impending fieldwork that would take me thousands of miles away from Wales' rainy capital to the United States' dry south-western desert; my father wasn't the only person concerned. My goal? To assuage the concerns and doubts that had been raised in the ethics committee that had prompted this meeting. My project? I wanted to learn about drug trafficking – or, more precisely, how drug trafficking organizations operated in various cities in the U.S. I proposed to write a "history from below" (Thompson 1966), constructed from

conversations with people who had participated, prevented, or simply been around the drug trade now or in the past (Decker and Chapman 2008, Cromwell and Olson 1991). I planned on visiting the El Paso, Phoenix, and Chicago metropolitan areas.

Examining these three communities, separated by hundreds of miles but united by the public scrutiny of their roles in the drug trade, could lead to a better understanding of the drug trade in the U.S. Politicians and pundits maintained that Mexican drug cartels, particularly Chapo Guzmán's Sinaloa Cartel, had a significant presence throughout the U.S. These claims needed to be examined; the presence of a drug cartel and the drug trade in terms of the illicit enterprises, organizations, and people involved with it needed to be understood. Looking at El Paso, Phoenix, and Chicago, should provide a fuller, though by no means perfectly complete, picture of the illicit drug trade in the U.S. as underwritten by Mexican DTOs. The question then became: How was I to figure those puzzles out? The answer: I would talk to those who were involved.

The late Tom Horlick-Jones, the head of the school's ethics board when I was preparing to start on my fieldwork, was keen on my project; he just wanted to ensure that I had considered my risks and would be as safe as possible under the circumstances. After all, I was planning on visiting Ciudad Juárez, one of the cities with the highest murder rates in the world at the time. Professor Horlick-Jones asked me what measures I would take to be safe there. Weirdly, I didn't feel afraid about going to Juárez in part because I knew what I wasn't going to do.

I wasn't going to live in the rough ends of Juárez like Philippe Bourgois (2003) did in Spanish Harlem, intent on absorbing the surroundings and becoming a denizen of the neighbourhood. I wasn't going to run up into the heart of Juárez and start asking random people questions like Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) did in the Chicago projects. That would be stupid; the professional questioners, journalists, were on edge in a city that had seen some of their colleagues disappeared and murdered (Bowden 2010, Red de Periodistas de Juárez 2012). I also knew that I wasn't going to befriend some local guys who were associated with criminal activity like Alice Goffman (2014) did in Philadelphia while trying to be a part of their lives. Too many people had been slaughtered without a second thought in Juárez over the last few years and the dangers of being in the wrong place at the wrong time would have escalated if I hung around the wrong people. And I wasn't going to find a crew of lower-level gang members with whom I could hang out while maintaining a distance like Timothy Lauger (2012) did on the streets of

Indianapolis. After all, nobody posted up on street corners in El Paso any more. The kind of “street corner society” that William Foote Whyte (1943) once described in Boston, and had been once applicable to El Paso and Phoenix, was mostly a thing of the past, even as living conditions did not seem to dramatically change for the area’s poor. To that end, there were no dealers loitering around waiting for customers. In short, I wasn’t willing to face great risk.

A member of the Barrio Azteca prison gang named Pancho would later give me the perfect analogy to understand the lack of violence: “You don’t see anything because it all happens ‘under water.’” The crux of the problem was that I was not from nor had I ever lived in Juárez – or any of the other cities I was visiting. And I didn’t have time to develop the relationships and *confianza* – trust – necessary to conduct the long-term, embedded ethnographic studies that other researchers had undertaken (Bourgois 2003, Adler 1993).

But I wasn’t worried; I had a plan: if everything was deep under water like Pancho said, I’d just have to go scuba diving. I had identified the ports that I was going to visit throughout this journey. El Paso, Phoenix, and Chicago, each had some history with the drug trade. Next, I needed to find boat captains – the gatekeepers needed to give me access, at each of these ports – who would be willing to help me explore the deep sea. Sometimes, interesting scenes exist just off the shore, but I wanted access to further out. The boat captains were my ticket there. If they deemed the adventure too dangerous, I could always ask them to share their own experiences. The trick was to find captains who sailed under each of the various flags. There was the “coast guard” flag under which the various law enforcement bodies sailed; they controlled the seas. Then there was the “merchant” flag that adorned the masts of various drug trafficking organizations and street and prison gangs which facilitated local aspects of the drug trade. Finally, there was the “Jolly Roger” flag that characterized the rip crews, consisting of rogue gang members and others who battled both the merchants and the coast guard. Only by voyaging on vessels of each flag – or, at least, speaking to their crews – could I develop an understanding of the politics and dynamics of the world I sought to explore.

By riding along the surface with the boat captains and talking to deckhands and other passengers, I hoped to generate a panoramic view of what happens under water, much like Decker and Chapman (2008) and Cromwell and Olson (1991) before them. I would supplement what I learned from these people with occasional dives at places

safe enough to do so. The question became, “How do I find these boats?” Unlike the real scuba-diving industry which openly advertises, these boats were elusive. I was proactive. I had written to various universities, local organizations, and local law enforcement in the cities I intended to call, and had received a few promising responses upon which I planned to expand.

I booked my flight back to the U.S. I’d visit home and then hit the road, spending the winter months in the desert, avoiding the heat, and the summer months in Chicago, avoiding the bitter cold. Whatever else I needed to do, I’d figure it out. Everything was going well, but then life got in the way. Two days after landing in the U.S., my father died. I spent the remainder of the year at home, adjusting to my new reality.

With the new year, I headed to El Paso, Texas, my first field stop. I had done my best to fit into the environment. My buddy Will, who had grown up in Texas and knew the state well, had recommended I buy a pickup truck.

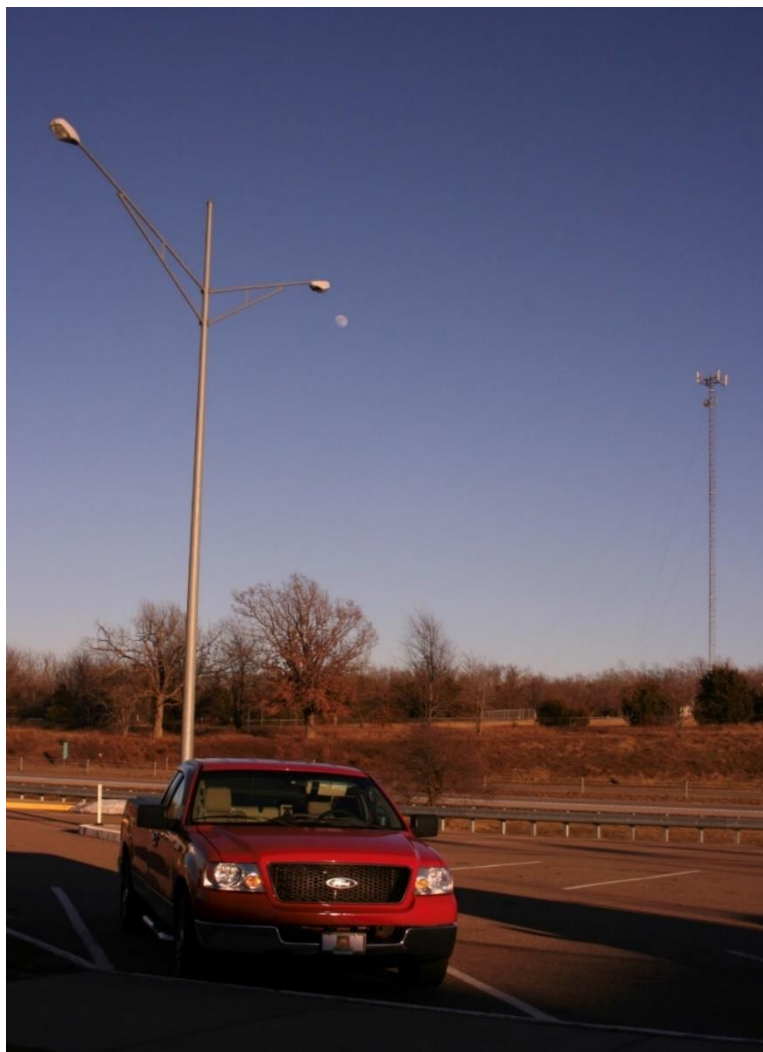


Photo 1: The Red Pickup

“With a pickup, you’ll be invisible,” Will advised. “Nobody will think that you don’t belong because there are so many trucks around. Even if you’re in a poorer neighbourhood, they’ll think that you’re a construction worker or something. An older truck, maybe one that’s a little beat up, that’s what you’re looking for.”

So, I got a red Ford F-150 that was a few years old but still good on miles with a big scratch along the side of the bed. I stopped at Will’s place in Dallas and registered it in Texas. With my ride all Lone Star, I just needed to figure out how to personify Texas. Although I was born in Lubbock, Buddy Holly’s hometown, I hadn’t lived in Texas since my infancy. But I did have one thing going for me: I’m brown.

Not all brown is the same, but, fortunately for me, my brown is one of ethnic ambiguity. Usually, my accent betrays my American roots, but even before I open my mouth people make assumptions. It is seldom that someone comes up to me and correctly identifies either my Indian or Italian heritage. In places where white people are the majority population, I’ve been identified as Moroccan, Albanian, Algerian, Middle Eastern (particularly following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001), and Gypsy. Usually, the identifications of Maghrebi, Middle Easterner, or Gypsy accompanied attempts of intimidation. In places where brown people are the majority population, I’ve been mistaken for being Hispanic or Brazilian, which typically carry positive connotations.

The first time I was suspected of being Hispanic was when I was an infant, and that instance was the exception to that trend. It was September 1985; my dad had gone to Mexico City to sit a multi-day exam, and my mom and I followed a few days later.

“Back then, you could cross the border with just a birth certificate if you were a child,” my mother explained. For my first international trip, all I had was “a slip of paper; it wasn’t even an official birth certificate, but it sufficed.” At the airport in Mexico City, to take the return flight to Dallas, my mother checked her bags and, inadvertently along with them, that little slip of paper, an error which would cause problems at the boarding gate.

“At that time, there was trafficking in babies in Mexico, across the Mexican-American border,” my mother explained. “And you being a brown baby [with a white, blue-eyed mother] and the fact that your father and I had entered Mexico separately raised concerns. So, essentially, we began this process of how to board the plane without your documents, without any documentation for you. And several men got

involved, different agents in the airport, and they were trying to decide whether you were a Mexican baby we had purchased or whether you were truly my child.

“They talked amongst themselves, and they asked totally ridiculous questions, from my perspective, such as, ‘Was I a good Catholic?’ Of course, this is all going on in Spanish, and your father, who was holding you the whole time, didn’t know what was going on. [...And] they were making different observations, such as you were very comfortable with your father and very comfortable with me. And it just went on, and we were about to miss our flight. But, my biggest concern was that they were going to take you and how would we ever find you in this legal maze that would develop. But one of the men prevailed and decided that you must be our child.”

Had I been screaming or crying, that story could have ended up quite differently. But, I was comfortable and my comfort was contagious. And being comfortable is paramount to establishing and maintaining a good rapport with others.

In every place I have lived for any significant length of time, I have been a brown man in a white society, a fact that became clearer to me as I got older and began to deal with the unfriendly looks and the random stops by the authorities. Such experiences, as aggravating as they were, taught me that when people are not comfortable with me, for whatever reason, they create trouble for me. I have felt the gaze of racial mistrust in the security of my own middle-class life; I never needed to go to the “hood” to understand that phenomenon or to imagine its magnitude. So, as an adult, I’ve striven to make people comfortable because in the odd instance when people cease to be comfortable with me, I find myself in situations that I really don’t want to be in, no matter where I might be.

As I lived in El Paso, I realized that for the first time in my life, I was living in a place where most people in the community accepted me as I am; I easily passed for a local. I was not a white anomaly in a dark world. I didn’t make anyone uncomfortable because I was totally alien to their community or represented a population they feared. Though I continued to feel like an outsider due to my non-native Spanish accent and my lack of a personal history in *Chucotown*, in short order I felt more at home there than anywhere else I had ever lived.

I realized how well I blended into the background when I took a white friend, Brad, over to Juárez to see the market one Sunday. At this point, I had been to Juárez by myself over fifteen times without incident. Usually, when I crossed into Juárez the cabbies might offer me a ride which I declined in favour of the city bus. No one else said

anything out of the ordinary. But, when I brought Brad over, these same cabbies offered access to dope and prostitutes. The first day we went to visit Juárez, a police officer accused us of being drunk in an attempt to shake us down. We hadn't touched a drink, and fortunately the officer's partner was not interested in continuing the interrogation. Nonetheless, it was clear that Brad's fair skin and blue eyes made him, and me by virtue of proximity, stand out. The offers for drugs and paid sex were rehearsed each of the four times I went over with Brad, though such offers never occurred when I was alone. Brad did not blend into the background and certainly could not easily feel comfortable on his own.

Living in a Hispanic neighbourhood in Phoenix and a mixed neighbourhood in Chicago led to similar experiences: I was living among people who didn't see me as out of the ordinary.

### **What's in a Name?**

Although the folks in El Paso didn't view me as an outsider, I did my part to blend in. I went by the name "Ray" because my experiences in different non-English speaking countries made it clear that people become uncomfortable, due to embarrassment, when they need to pronounce a name which is unusual to them. Rather than talk to you, they'll just ignore you. I figured that many folks wouldn't bother to talk to me if they couldn't pronounce my name.

So Ray it was, a name to which every one of my target audiences – black, white, and Latino – could relate and easily pronounce. Many folks assumed I was Hispanic or had a Hispanic parent. One comment from Simón, a day worker from Juárez whom I interviewed, underscored this assumption. As we wrapped up the interview, Simón said in parting, "Don't forget where you're from. You're representing *la raza* and I think you're doing a good job." He was confused when I told him that I wasn't Chicano<sup>3</sup> or even Hispanic, a fact that I never disclosed unless I was asked directly.

The right name helped me set the stage for a good first impression. That very first interaction, whether it is in the form of a face-to-face meeting, an email, a telephone call, a message through a forum, or an advertisement accessed on a classified ads site, makes people consider whether they are comfortable. If people are

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<sup>3</sup> Mexican-American



uncomfortable, they will have little incentive to respond unless there is something on offer that outweighs the discomfort they feel. Accordingly, it is important to make people comfortable from the first point of contact.

My initial strategy to find “boat captains” was to write emails to members of the community, law enforcement, and academics who could help me. But, first, I needed to get prepared. In the commissioning process, I created a cyber-identity for myself. I built a research profile on my university’s website and a personal research website that had my photograph, a description of my project, and the information sheets that I would ask people to read when I would meet them for the interviews. I used search engine optimization (SEO) to redirect various spellings and configurations of my name to my webpage. Then I established myself on social media through a public Facebook page and a Twitter account. I wanted to make sure that when people searched for me online, they could find me and see that my research was based in a university and was not some front for a journalist or a member of law enforcement.

Prior experience had taught me that even the most well-intentioned connections often fail to yield willing respondents. The emails produced mixed results. In the end, my contacts in Juárez panned out, albeit slowly, but El Paso did not develop as quickly as expected. Of the ten organizations I initially contacted, only two responded. My contacts in Juárez allowed me to easily and safely gather the data which I did and to access the world of drugs and unlawfulness in a meaningful way. However, the limitations were obvious. For instance, one journalist I shadowed abruptly sent me an email saying he could no longer help me, citing internal politics of the newspaper he worked for. In El Paso, I met the late Charles Bowden who introduced me to José “Raulio” Rivera Fierro, the founding father of the Barrio Azteca prison gang. He shared with me the history and organizational depths of Barrio Azteca.

Phoenix worked considerably better than El Paso, thanks to Scott Decker and Jeff Hynes. Professor Decker and Commander Hynes helped me gain access to several police officers of various ranks and to several current and former members of a prison gang by using chain/snowball referrals. These men served as gatekeepers to existing networks of people who were relevant to my research. If such extensive networks existed in my other sites, I was less successful in finding the appropriate gatekeepers. Accordingly, Phoenix afforded me the best access to a fixed community of people who were formerly/ currently of the same street and, in some cases, prison gang. As a result, I could explore depths that were not readily available to me in the other field sites,

thereby, appreciating the nuances of one particular organizational structure.

Additionally, I gained excellent access to law enforcement, including a former police chief, who focused on gangs. These individuals provided a high degree of context from the law enforcement perspective.

Before I reached Phoenix, Arizona had become the epicentre of a political discourse that focused on unauthorized immigrants, casting them in a negative light (K. M. Campbell 2011). Moreover, there were some nationally recognized individuals who had developed a negative reputation among the Hispanic community. None was more famous than Joe Arpaio, the Maricopa County Sheriff (Romero, 2011). Plus, to me, as an outsider, it seemed that aggressive, anti-immigrant policing extended to the local police, too, an impression that I would soon find out to be dubious, if not outright false, during my time in Phoenix.

Chicago, my final field site, was slow like El Paso, though I did manage to gain access to a neighbourhood-based street gang via a Violence Interrupter. Many of the people I engaged with in Chicago through formal channels either blew me completely off or were sceptical of me. To complicate matters, I was in Chicago during an electoral race that made several police reluctant to speak with me, likely fearing that their words could be used for political gain. Additionally, given the violent reputations of some of the actors in the world that I was studying, I maintained caution. Of all the sites, Juárez included, I was most fearful of personal harm in Chicago, perhaps due to the stories I had heard growing up downstate. My caution made it difficult to meet people within the networks I wished to explore, so I was forced to think of another way to explore underwater.

#### *CASTING A NET: USING THE INTERNET TO RECRUIT RESPONDENTS*

I wasn't comfortable approaching a stranger who I thought was doing something illegal and striking up a conversation; so, on a whim, I decided to try another strategy: find deckhands and passengers on merchant ships. Depending on the site, deckhands were street or prison gang members, and occasionally people who had gone to prison for trafficking offences but were otherwise unaffiliated. They were involved in the drug trade at some level and knew how things worked and what their barriers to entry or promotion were, or, in the case that they weren't involved, they knew what the rules of the game were. Passengers were people who lived near the drug trade, perhaps because of their jobs, where they lived, a trip to prison, or the choices a relative had made.

Figuring that deckhands and passengers would be more likely to need even small economic opportunities, I placed a classified ad on Craigslist to encourage participants to identify themselves and come to me willingly, with the promise of a twenty dollar Wal-Mart gift card for their efforts. This method worked well in El Paso because, unlike Phoenix and Chicago, ads were free. In El Paso, I could change the ad as needed to get good responses.

The ad featured the logos of my university and the funding body along with general information regarding my project. I omitted any photo of myself to maintain my racial ambiguity. It was written with simple sentence syntax and a simple lexicon. Each paragraph was featured in both English and Spanish. The content echoed the information sheets given to participants before being interviewed. The ad emphasized that the study only focused on crimes for which respondents had been convicted, given that double jeopardy would not apply to them. It furnished links to my research website, the university where the interview was to take place, and my contact information.

To establish a layer of security, I created a buffer with my contact information. To achieve this buffer, I used a shell e-mail account based on my research website's domain which I routed through my university email account along with a VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) number which I routed to my cell phone and office telephone, making it appear as if my phone number was a local number. If necessary, the e-mail address and number could be destroyed, leaving no trace to a hostile party. After having a friend check the Spanish version of the ad, I placed it on Craigslist in the "general labor" section, with the logic that someone with a felony record might be looking for casual work and would be interested in the meagre compensation I was offering. I had no idea whether this plan would work.

Phone calls started a few hours after posting the initial ad; after a couple of days, people stopped calling. The first ad yielded six responses, enough to fill up my available time with interviews. I repeated the process twice more. In all, ten recruits in El Paso came to be interviewed. Perhaps another five people failed to keep their appointments. Yet those ten recruits helped me achieve data saturation by repeating the stories I had heard from people using traditional recruitment methods (Sadler et al. 2010). All but four of the El Paso respondents spoke in English initially (and there was only one other Spanish-first respondent in the U.S. in the study).

All the people from El Paso were appropriate respondents, given their personal histories with buying, selling, or transporting drugs. At first, I was unsure about their suitability, but as I interviewed more people, I soon learned that they had experiences which were directly answering my research questions. I attribute this success rate to two things. First, the likelihood that a person with a felony conviction was involved in the drug trade was probably higher in El Paso, given the normality of the drug trade in the area. Howard Campbell, a UTEP anthropologist who has written extensively about the border<sup>4</sup> told me that, in the past, “jumping a brick” – moving a compressed brick, typically weighing approximately a kilo, of (usually) cocaine or heroin across the border – was a rite of passage that didn’t have the negative connotation or risk outlook that it does today. Second, I knew very little about the drug trade in El Paso or the dynamics of the organizations operating there outside of Campbell’s (2009, 2005) work, Charles Bowden’s (2002, 2010) work, and the unending media reports: consequently, most of the information recounted by my El Paso respondents was new to me.

The people who responded to the ad included former drug users who had crossed into Juárez to score dope directly from shooting galleries<sup>5</sup> to individuals who identified themselves as either current or former prison gang members. The initial screening was cursory since most people admitted to either involvement in a gang or a drug conviction, facts which were easily substantiated based on gang tattoos they showed me; track marks on their arms, indicating intravenous drug use; or intimate knowledge of the operations of gang or prison life that was largely consistent amongst the respondents (see: Decker et al. 2014).

The study’s 129 respondents can be divided into three broad groups: tangential actors, law enforcement actors, and involved actors. (See Figure 2 for a more detailed breakdown.) The thirty-seven tangential actors were people who had in some way been touched by the drug trade or the related political rhetoric. These people included attorneys and judges who worked on unauthorized immigration cases; journalists who

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example Campbell 2014, 2009, 2005, Heyman and Campbell 2004, Campbell and Hansen 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Shooting galleries are places where intravenous drug users can purchase and use their drugs. Often, they rely on a “doctor” to inject the drugs into their veins. The doctor is usually another drug user, but one who is considered to have a steady hand, thus reducing the risk of missing the vein, a possibility which is high when a person is “dope sick,” that is, feeling the effects of withdrawal.

had covered related beats; members of the communities in which I lived; and people whose family members had been involved. The thirty-two law enforcement actors included police, most of whom were ranking officers; other policing agents; spokespeople of the DEA; and senior law enforcement administrators whose work was directly related to issues connected to the drug trade.

	<i>El Paso/Juárez</i>	<i>Phoenix/Nogales</i>	<i>Chicago</i>	<i>Totals</i>
<b><i>Tangential Actors</i></b>				<b>37</b>
<i>Recruited online</i>	2	3	2	
<i>Chain referral</i>	10	4	0	
<i>Direct Contact</i>	4	0	0	
<i>Gonzo</i>	10	1	1	
<b><i>Involved Actors</i></b>				<b>60</b>
<i>Recruited online</i>	8	13	13	
<i>Chain referral</i>	9	8	5	
<i>Direct Contact</i>	0	1	0	
<i>Gonzo</i>	0	3	0	
<b><i>Law Enforcement</i></b>				<b>32</b>
<i>Recruited online</i>	0	0	1	
<i>Chain referral</i>	4	11	6	
<i>Direct Contact</i>	4	4	2	
<i>Gonzo</i>	0	0	0	
<b><i>Total respondents</i></b>	<b>51</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>129</b>

**Figure 2: Respondent breakdown by type, recruitment method, and place.**

The biggest group of respondents were sixty involved actors, people who were, at the time of interview, currently or formerly directly involved in the drug trade either as users, dealers, traffickers, or other participants in illicit enterprises related to the drug trade, generally stated. The majority of these individuals, fifty-six, were male. Of the male respondents, thirty-nine were Hispanic, ten African American, two Native American, and eleven white. There were also four Hispanic women.

All the respondents were between the ages of 19 and 54 with the mean age of the male respondents being 36 years old. For the males, the ages varied among the sites: in Texas (and Mexico), they ranged from 26 to 54 years old with a mean age of 38; in Arizona, they ranged from 22 to 54 with a mean age of 39; and, in Chicago, they ranged from 19 to 51 with a mean age of 31. Women across all sites had a mean age of 40. A disproportionately high number of the female respondents were from Arizona (2:1:1; Arizona: Texas: Illinois), so no age comparisons can properly be made across sites.

The generally high ages of all of the respondents interviewed were likely a product of my seeking individuals who had served time for serious crimes related to the drug trade and who were now out of prison. Chicago deviates significantly from the

ages interviewed in Texas and Arizona because I was given access to younger, less experienced respondents through a gatekeeper. Across all sites, some of the older respondents indicated that they wished to participate because they felt it was a way to give back to society when they had been repeatedly told by the criminal justice system that they had only taken or been a burden to it.

As a group, the former inmates had generally entered prison for the first time in their late teens or early twenties, spent at least a third of their adult lives incarcerated, and typically described their latest release as being a matter of months before the interview. Some of the oldest participants reported having been released from prison for the last time in the past six to ten years. The array of decades served by respondents allowed me to understand prison culture from the 1970s until a matter of months before my fieldwork.

Because I never asked for snowball references from my respondents, I did not encounter the problems of having fake respondents, coached by those who had already participated in my study (Cromwell and Olson 1991). To that end, because a significant portion of the respondents in each category did not know the other participants, I am confident that the information provided was accurate, given that responses to questions concerning behaviour and practices were often consistent among the respondents. This consistency has allowed me to develop an accurate, albeit broad, understanding of the topics studied.

Although most respondents appeared comfortable talking to me, they were uncomfortable in sharing this experience with others in their social circles. The few referrals that did occur were from relatively low-level respondents referring their friends. Only one of these friends followed up with me, and this person proved to be a quality respondent – someone who contributed to my knowledge regarding local drug markets and/or prison dynamics.

My methodology was not designed to act as a “respondent driven sample (RDS),” in that I was not attempting to have my respondents provide me access to the broader population (Heckathorn 1997). I had neither time nor resources for secondary incentives necessary for an RDS recruitment drive. Instead, my focus was to get potential respondents to self-select. The sample would be random, as it would depend on whether a potential person saw my ad. Moreover, such respondents would be better prepared to cooperate with me. Of the sixty-four “drug trade actors”, thirty-nine were recruited using the internet recruitment method. This method helped access

people whom I would never have encountered otherwise, thus expanding my population coverage. Additionally, the method allowed me to triangulate data since the respondents recruited from the internet sample were, with only one exception, random, unrelated, and unassociated people. It also helped me triangulate claims made by respondents who were recruited using different methods. As my respondents shared similar accounts time and time again, particularly in El Paso and Phoenix, I became reasonably sure that the panorama of the drug trade and prison life was true, or at least perceived to be true, by those involved.

I repeated the online recruitment process in both Phoenix and Chicago, but with less success than in El Paso. Initially, I ran the El Paso ad in Phoenix, only changing the location details. However, the responses were not of the same “quality.” Part of the problem was my initial ignorance of the stringent DUI laws in Arizona that can land a severe or repeat offender in state prison. As a result, some of my respondents had been in prison for more than a year for DUI violations.

In Texas, a sentence of more than a year usually indicated that the individual had been locked up in a medium security prison, an experience which at the very least would allow me to ask about the respondent’s experience with prison gangs. However, in Phoenix, those convicted of DUIs were placed on low-security yards and would not have such experiences. I adjusted my recruitment process accordingly and began to screen potential respondents, thus eliminating some unqualified candidates. Further iterations of my ad listed explicit qualifiers, which produced better respondents.

In Phoenix, I had some cold callers who just showed up hoping for an interview. I missed some of these because I wasn’t always at the office. In talking to the alarmed secretaries who were trying to figure out what was happening in the building, I learned that those who did cold call always looked the part, covered in faded prison tattoos and certainly out of place at Arizona State University’s downtown Phoenix campus where I had my office.

Chicago presented its own difficulties for my online recruitment. The first obstacle to overcome was the lack of a freely accessible office. To enter my office, respondents needed state ID. So, to counter that, and to account for the sheer size of the city, which made it difficult for people to reach my downtown office since transportation or parking was expensive, I adjusted my ad to offer to meet people in neighbourhood libraries, public, safe, and neutral spaces (Worthen 2013). This often worked, but one notable incident occurred in which a librarian decided that the library

was not a place where I could talk to people (though we had received permission from another, less senior librarian) and my respondent and I were thrown out.

In Chicago, I played with ad placement on Craigslist – as a “gig” rather than a “job,” which worked for a time. Then, one day, I received a notice that my ad had been flagged and removed from circulation. There was no customer support, so I went on the help forum, amending my ad based on the feedback received, but it was again flagged, though this time without a warning message. Eventually, I learned that the “appropriate” place for my ad was under the “et cetera” heading which featured requests for participation in surveys. I placed it there and no longer had issues with keeping my ad up, but it may not have reached the same kind of respondents as when it was listed under the “general labor” heading.

Though I found little evidence from those interviewed that that was the case, by placing my ad in a section of Craigslist that was for studies, I ran the risk of recruiting “stale” respondents, individuals who have been interviewed several times before for various reasons and have a certain set of pre-existing expectations as to what ought to happen in the interview experience. (My colleagues in Juárez expressed this concern, given the difficulty in finding respondents and the use of the same respondents repeatedly by different researchers.) I employed a rigorous screening process in Chicago as it became evident that four or five folks had not read my ad; they had no experiences which were of any value for this project. Given the approaching holiday season, it is possible that these individuals were interested in earning some money by any means possible (Worthen 2013). This screening process helped me avoid having non-quality respondents.

Throughout the whole online ad experience over all three sites, nearly everyone who followed through and came to my office was a person who opened up and told his story naturally. Of the 40 respondents whom I interviewed through online recruitment, only two were individuals who were not quality respondents. The information gained from the remaining 38 interviews allowed me to triangulate the claims made by people who came from closer relationships, where the risk of respondent contamination was higher.

A third man had difficulty communicating; it was as if he had never told his story before to anyone. Throughout the interview, he was reluctant to answer questions with complete, narrative answers. Once I had gone through my entire set of themes, I closed the interview and offered him the gift card. He was surprised. He had



found out about my study by word of mouth and had no idea that there was anything in it for him. Like several other respondents, he told me that he wanted to help me out because he felt that it was important that somebody study his community and where he came from in order to make change. Talking to me was a way he could give back.

In addition to the 40 people who kept their appointments, I had three further exchanges with individuals who had seen the ad. One man in El Paso called me to wish me luck with my project. He had been convicted recently for a misdemeanour. He claimed that the charge was bogus and that it cost him a small fortune to get it reduced to a misdemeanour. He was also concerned – correctly – that I wasn't reaching those with the best stories. He felt that folks who live in the poor downtown areas, who might not have internet, would have a good story to tell – one in which they are targeted and accused by police in order to get the court system to generate an income in El Paso. A man in Phoenix called but got cold feet. He offered, over the phone, that “The cops treat us like shit here. Jail is inhumane. They treat everybody like shit. It isn't right, man.” In Chicago, another man reached out to me via the internet. He emailed me photographs of old school gang insignias and sweaters. I invited him to come in for an interview; but, in the end, he never did.

#### *CASTING A LINE: TARGETED ONLINE RECRUITMENT*

In addition to the use of Craigslist, I used two other websites to gain access: Twitter and Couchsurfing. Twitter allowed me to access individuals who would be of interest but unlikely to view my call for participants on Craigslist. I targeted individuals who had a profile that was of interest to me, including ex-offenders, police officers, and journalists. I identified these individuals by doing searches for key terms on Twitter or, in the case of some journalists, by finding their Twitter handles via plugs in articles I had read.

The process was straight forward. I followed my targets and then tweeted at them saying that I was interested in interviewing them for research purposes with a link to my research website. In all six cases, the targets replied to me initially. The ex-offenders and some of the journalists eventually did not follow through. The three who did follow through agreed to meet me at neutral locations and spoke openly with me. One journalist was able and willing to introduce me to further, high-quality law-enforcement contacts. Given the difficulties I had in gaining such contacts in Chicago, this strategy greatly increased my data for this site.

Couchsurfing provided me with an opportunity to meet people who lived in some of the sites I visited briefly. In Del Rio, Texas, I met an American woman, who worked as a supervisor in Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, Mexico, and who shared with me the insights she had gathered from her few years straddling the border. In Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, I met a woman who introduced me to a journalist who covered narco issues, providing me with contact where I had little. Though such experiences cannot be considered to represent the views of many or most, they provide context to the overall situation from a local perspective.

### **A Note on Women and Online Recruitment**

Women were underrepresented throughout my sample. I had expected this problem. My prior research experience dealing with unauthorized immigrants was that even if women were qualified to be part of the sample, they often did not have the time or the willingness to participate. It is also likely that women are less comfortable engaging with a strange male, with only a brief evaluation period during which they must decide whether to trust me. It is also possible that women perceive the risk of participating in such studies as being too great. In terms of targeted online recruitment, my searches yielded a disproportionately high number of men.

When looking for women with criminal records, it is logical that there will be fewer, given their relatively low rates of offending – particularly serious offending – when compared to men (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996, Belknap 2014). Accordingly, my standards for women participants' criminal backgrounds were lower than those for men. I was willing to accept a much larger array of women because their perspective was undoubtedly going to be underrepresented in my sample. I successfully recruited four women with the online recruitment method. Though my standards were lowered, the stories these four women shared were informative. They gave me a perspective that was otherwise next to impossible for me to achieve, given my tight timetable.

### *DIVING IN: GOING GONZO AND SITUATIONAL PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT*

My experiences with the online respondents, coupled with my increasing familiarity with a place over time, gave me the confidence I needed to venture off on my own. I learned how to occupy space inconspicuously and engage the denizens of that space without making them uncomfortable with me. By managing my role in a new space properly, by appearing as if I belonged, I was able to take advantage of spontaneous opportunities and engage in what I call “situational participant

recruitment.” This method can be classed as a type of “gonzo research,” unsystematic recruitment and observation within the natural parameters that the field provides (Innes 2014).

These principles proved useful in both formal and informal spaces. For instance, gonzo methods provided atypical access to members of immigration and criminal courts. Throughout my time in the southwest, I attended several immigration court hearings and the murder trial of a Barrio Azteca gang member. By showing up and becoming part of the fabric, I could speak to lawyers, judges, court clerks, and others who were in the court setting. Occasionally, I conducted informal interviews. Once, I gained access to part of an asylum case, although I was a non-party to the case.

Yet, the best opportunities arose from people who were part of my normal routine. Unsurprisingly, the sites where I seemed to fit into the best, the Hispanic communities in which I lived and the academic communities in which I worked, yielded the most beneficial gonzo opportunities.

### **Going Gonzo**

“Gonzo” opportunities – those that arose from pure luck and were not systematically cultivated, but nevertheless depend on being immersed in the setting (Innes 2014) – helped me acquire a nuanced understanding of the claims I had heard. They allowed me to visualize the world about which many had told me. They put faces onto people and façades onto buildings, setting the scenes in the stories that my respondents recounted to me. Frankly, I was astonished by the frequency at which gonzo opportunities arose and the facility with which they could often be exploited, at least initially. I learned the hard way that I had to take advantage of a gonzo opportunity the moment it presented itself since such moments were often (though not always) ephemeral with no ability to follow up on them.

Hanging out at the Tap, an El Paso institution, and striking up a conversation with a guy who was enjoying his last night out before beginning a prison sentence resulted in my learning about the margins of the drug trade and the role of prison gangs in the eastern part of Texas. On another occasion, accepting my participants’ invitations to ride along and see what they considered the real side of what I was studying, took me around El Paso and helped me understand the paucity of overt gang activity. In Juárez, even within the limits I placed on myself, opportunities presented themselves and I ended up in shooting galleries and brothels.

Phoenix gave me the chance to participate directly in the lives of ex-gang members. Initially, my contact was sceptical of my work but was swayed to give me access when I offered my skills as a teacher, something which he needed more than money. Next thing I knew, I was teaching basic job skills to people who were associated with gangs. When a student's brother was murdered, helping the family raise money through the "funeral car wash" gained me credibility within the community. Open ears allowed me to learn about different players in the principal gang and to conduct better interviews later. In Chicago, an unexpected invitation by one of the Violence Interrupters to shadow him as he went about his job granted me access to several street-gang members who played different roles within the gang. In short, exploiting gonzo opportunities allowed me to dive to a depth of knowledge that I had only dreamed of visiting, supplementing the breadth of knowledge that my other recruitment methods had given me.

### **Situational Participant Recruitment (Gonzo Recruitment)**

Even though I lived in low-income, predominately Chicano neighbourhoods for a time in El Paso and Phoenix<sup>6</sup>, I never *felt* as if I was doing an ethnography in part because I felt that I could or did belong in those spaces. Perhaps my rapid, natural relationship with those spaces allowed me to engage in "situational participant recruitment." I took advantage of my non-threatening status to recruit a handful of participants. In essence, I took advantage of occupying a space without question to approach people and directly enquire if they would participate in my study as I went about my daily routine, which I sometimes modified to justify my occupation of certain spaces without arousing alarm or suspicion.

As a member of the shared space, I was conferred an identity as being part of the community. I would greet my neighbours and colleagues and slowly reveal what I was doing. This interaction allowed me to discover that some of these people had relevant stories to tell. Several of my housemates in El Paso had either dealt or used

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<sup>6</sup> In Phoenix, the house in which I was living was burglarized. The intruders took almost everything of value that I had. This experience left me generally unwilling to live in a rough part of Chicago, the city which I regarded as the one that carried the most risks of any that I studied. I am sure that my refusal to live in the rougher parts of Chicago made situational participant recruitment less likely.

drugs in their lifetimes. My neighbour across the street had a brother who had worked as a drug mule. The janitor of the office building in which I worked at UTEP had witnessed the Juárez violence first hand. In Phoenix, my neighbour had worked as a security guard for some of the rougher clubs in town. In Chicago, a receptionist at a building in which I sometimes interviewed my respondents had a son who had been a gang member and who had been incarcerated for drug crimes. I talked to all of these people informally and interviewed more than half formally, resulting in nine recorded interviews.

I also engaged in an accelerated version of my situation participant recruitment by occupying a space where I was likely to find someone who I wanted to interview. In essence, I was setting myself up for the possibility of having a gonzo opportunity with the noticeable difference that I actively attempted to convert the gonzo opportunity into a formal interview. Within the communities in which I engaged, smoking remains a relatively common outdoor social activity. By keeping a pack of cigarettes and a lighter on display next to me as I occupied the space, such as the shopping centre where I assisted the former gang members or the front of my house, passers-by would stop, ask for a cigarette and a light, thereby providing me with a perfect ice breaker. Like the online ad recruitment, potential recruits approached me, so I was in control of the conversation. As time went on, and I became better at identifying people who had gang-related tattoos, this strategy allowed me to target a key individual who gave me a detailed description of the Arizona prison-gang hierarchy. Moreover, such conversations allowed me to ask questions about the neighbourhood or about people's perceptions about their neighbourhoods and the way in which the drug trade affected them which provided me a more nuanced backdrop about my surroundings.

### *INTERVIEWING IN THE COMFORT ZONE*

A lot of status is afforded to data gathered during ethnographic observation and interviews conducted on site, the argument being that respondents answer questions more naturally when they are in a familiar environment. Patricia Adler (1993, 11) notes that investigative field research "with emphasis on direct personal observation, interaction, and experience, is the only way to acquire accurate knowledge about deviant behavior." I certainly did my best to conduct investigative field research, but my ability to participate was limited by privilege, or lack thereof.

Whereas Adler talks about smoking marijuana with her subjects and Alice Goffman talks about not smoking it, only because it would impair her, I draw on a vastly

different set of considerations. The line between me, middle-class, elite-educated college student, and me, minority target of the long arm of the law, is a very thin one. One of many such reminders of how thin that line is occurred when I was 23 and the Chicago PD forced me to strip in the dead of winter in their search for drugs that I had never even thought to purchase. I simply cannot participate as Adler did because I believe that if an incident did occur where I became involved with the police, then I would not be let off easily, thereby severely damaging my future prospects.

Instead, I strove to create a comfort zone and to guide respondents towards it. I wanted to make sure people felt as if the decision to talk to me was their own. In other words, respondents exercised their own agency when they identified themselves as potential respondents. They had generally already decided that they would talk to me and, probably, share with me. I had not encroached on their lives; they initiated first contact and had a chance to clear any initial doubts. In that first interaction, I treated everyone with respect, which was almost always reciprocated. To further cement the respondent's role in making the choice to participate, I told him or her when I was *not* available and made myself open to his or her convenience. In keeping their appointments and coming to me (except in Chicago where I met some of the participants in neighbourhood libraries close to where they lived or some other neutral location), my respondents again were given another chance to exit or confirm their interest in participating.

I wanted people to see me as a non-threat. I did so by emphasizing that my interests were in crimes for which my respondents had already been convicted, reminding them that there is no double jeopardy in the U.S. And I emphasized that I was a student and, especially with people of colour, that the goal was to give voice to their often-muted voices and not further contribute to their oppression.

My self-portrayal as a curious person with virtuous aims helped to cast me in a positive light. Many of my respondents wanted me to *know* what was true and what was not. Much like the people Philippe Bourgois (2003) encountered in Spanish Harlem, my respondents would remind me: "You know, twenty dollars ain't shit. I'm doing this to help you out, man, because somebody needs to be doing what you're doing." Often, when the interview was over, the interviewees noted that they wanted to make a positive difference in somebody's life, and my ad gave them that opportunity. Occasionally, respondents remarked that they felt better having talked with someone about their past. They enjoyed the experience because I wasn't there to judge them, to

treat them poorly, or to make them feel badly about themselves again – they had had enough of that already.

With that comfort zone, I didn't need to see all of my respondents in their "native" environment like some endangered species to be studied for the sake of posterity. I treated these people as my equals and received them as my guests. With that approach, a wave of comfort filled the room, and they spoke openly. One respondent named Breeze, a man in his early fifties, told me that he had once been interviewed back in the 1980s by someone interested in prisons and drugs. "That guy was a real jerk. It seemed like his mind was already made up, that prisoners couldn't be fixed. His questions were real pointed. He wasn't at all like you. You just sit and listen to what I have to say. It's real open here."

Various people had told me to never trust gang members. "They exaggerate everything," one GI<sup>7</sup> officer offered as I attended the capital murder trial of Fidencio Valdez. I heard this advice again from José Rivera, who still followed news regarding Barrio Azteca though he had been out of the gang for over twenty years. Nonetheless, I seldom felt as if I was being spun a tall tale. Mature gang members and former gang members were not boisterous and fanciful. Many respondents pointed out where others might exaggerate their claims, referred to the fantastical portrayals of gang life in popular media, and presented their actions within this tempered framework.

It might be argued that the respondents were engaging in impression management, that they presented their histories in such a way as to make themselves appear favourably (Goffman 1956), if it were not for the degree of self-reflection that was often expressed in tandem with accounts of prison life or roles in the drug trade. My respondents were providing an account of their "everyday life," as it related to the drug trade or gangs, and took pains not to exaggerate. Moreover, I was a nobody to them, meaning that they had little to gain by impressing me; my respondents did not likely believe that I could garner them an audience or further their ambitions, be it a signal to competitors or a story to impress the general public. With me, respondents talked about the evolution of their views and behaviour towards prison life. The same can be said with the drug trade, where respondents contextualized actions, pointing out

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<sup>7</sup> Gang intelligence officer. These officers typically work in prisons within a gang intelligence unit and seek to identify gang members and gather information on gangs and their plans.

and detailing why fantastic accounts as portrayed in the media were unrealistic or implausible, an experience consistent with Rebecca Trammell's (2012) interviews with former inmates. Such context helped to create a relative sense of what actors in these communities deemed to be serious.

Furthermore, drawing on the expertise of my transcriptionists, I am confident that I was successful in getting respondents to be comfortable and to be mostly truthful. Two women transcribed my interviews: Lois, who transcribes for police departments throughout the U.S., particularly ones in California that deal with gang issues, and Ruby, who worked in a police department following her conviction and incarceration for selling crack cocaine. Lois remarked that she felt that the cops were "as straight with you as they could be within the limits of what they could share, even anonymously."

Lois further remarked that when I was interviewing the cops, even with the ones who were the most defensive with me at the start of an interview, "I saw what I always see. [The cops] make you fight for their trust at the beginning. That's normal. As you went on with the interviews, the trust level got deeper. I felt they were honest with you; [...] you know, as a transcriptionist, we hear so many tapes. You definitely hear some recordings where you just feel like the speaker isn't telling the truth." Ruby would often note in the transcripts that the content rung true based on her experiences in the drug world, and that most, though not all, of the events described seemed to be within the realm of possibility.

My trip underwater gave me several opportunities to see what wasn't visible from above. As with the real ocean, one diver cannot visit every place. Some places are just too deep or the rapids too fast for anyone but the best equipped or most experienced to visit. Some places are simply impossible for anyone to venture into, since only the beings from those depths can navigate those waters.



## II: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

## EL PASO AND CIUDAD JUÁREZ: DOWN THE RIO GRANDE

### *DOCKING IN EL PASO*

I cruised down the highway in the red pickup, driving west through the vast emptiness of Texas towards El Paso. Daylight illuminated the vast plains and oil fields that the highway cut through. With the sun's western descent, the brush and oil pumps turned into silhouettes. And after the sun set, the lights of the few towns in the distance and the flames, burning natural gas, atop beacons that pepper the middle of nowhere, break the darkness. Civilization returns in the stretch of Interstate 10 immediately before El Paso, which is first adorned by strip clubs and then gives way to several shopping malls and, eventually, in the western part of the city, to the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

The room I first rented was in a house located in the historic Sunset Heights neighbourhood of El Paso, next to the university. Sunset Heights has been around since before the Mexican Revolution, a violent conflict which began on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1910, when a call for arms was made to overthrow long-time dictator Porfirio Díaz (1830 – 1915) (Jamieson 1993). The violence lasted over a decade. Supposedly, José Doroteo Arango Arámbula (1878 – 1923), better known as Pancho Villa, owned and lived in a



**Photo 2: The Sunset Heights neighbourhood where I lived in El Paso, Texas. Juárez is in the background.**

property in the neighbourhood. During the Revolution, I was told, many people fled the violence and settled in Sunset Heights because it was just outside the reach of the conflict.

Today, the neighbourhood has a great variety of housing. The streets are haphazard, rarely lining up in a clean grid. Intersections provide a view of the mountains and Mexico. Parts of Sunset Heights still have the massive houses which indicate its affluent past. Yet some streets, like the one I lived on, are packed with apartment buildings and small, single-family dwellings, some of which have been split up into several apartments, each housing an entire family. The sidewalks are littered with glass and trash; the yards are home to barking dogs of varying degrees of viciousness, and the streets are filled with children playing in the evenings, a sight unseen in places where kids are plugged into their videogame systems.

The eastern part of El Paso, where I later moved to, is home to the headquarters of Fort Bliss, an Army base with a history that dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the Mexican Revolution, Fort Bliss became a cavalry post and was called upon to secure the border from spill-over violence and border violations. Its largest involvement in the Mexican Revolution came in 1916, when General John J. Pershing (1860 - 1948) led the Punitive Expedition in pursuit of Pancho Villa. The Punitive Expedition failed to capture the elusive Villa but successfully deployed airplanes in the field for the first time in American military history (Jamieson 1993).

Shortly after I arrived in El Paso, my friend Mikey drove me around town so I could get a feel for the city. Riding around I realized how large El Paso is. It is the 19<sup>th</sup> largest city in the United States by population (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), home to roughly 700,000 people. The city is also expansive, covering over 255 square miles. To drive from one end of El Paso to the other can take more than half an hour on the freeway. Looking out the window as we snaked through El Paso's many neighbourhoods, I noticed that the houses seem to be mostly ranches, though some two-storey residential dwellings can be found from time to time. There are affluent parts of town, where the houses are bigger and fancier. As one person told me, El Paso is a brown city – a reference to its earthy tones but one that could also apply to its large

Hispanic population<sup>8</sup> – which is unsurprising given that the Rio Grande<sup>9</sup> that separates El Paso from Juárez runs dry. Indeed, there is very little by way of grass and greenery, particularly in the middle of winter.

To show me the beauty of El Paso, Mikey took me up Scenic Drive, past the police training centre, to a magnificent view of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez that sits high on a perch along the south side of the Franklin Mountains. From above, what distinguishes the two cities are the busses and flashing lights. In Juárez, old school busses, painted in a foreign Technicolor hue, instead of their familiar orange monochrome, patrol the streets looking for passengers. Sometimes, the lights of the *Polícia Federal* flashing on top of their police trucks hurry from one point to another. Traffic is piled up behind the bridges that cross over to the United States. No such chaos



**Photo 3: Bird's eye view of El Paso (foreground) and Juárez (background). The red X in the distance, known as "La Equis," is a sculpture by Mexican artist Sebastian. It lies just across the U.S.-Mexico border.**

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<sup>8</sup> According to the (U.S. Census Bureau 2016), El Paso was 81.2 per cent Hispanic in 2014. It is no wonder that, while walking its streets, I felt part of the majority for the first time in my life.

<sup>9</sup> In Mexico, the Rio Grande is called the *Río Bravo*. The river was channelled after *The Convention of February 1<sup>st</sup>* was signed in 1933 by both the U.S. and Mexico (McDonald 2015). The channelling of the river has placed the original Border Patrol station on the Mexican side of the international border and, in the present day, has left the river nearly dry, rendering it neither *grand* nor *bravo*.

is apparent in El Paso, from the view above, at least. From that height, one cannot see what happens under water.

#### *LOOKING AROUND AT GROUND LEVEL*

A look on the ground provides the details that are hard to see from above. In El Paso, food, and culture are important. Tamale vendors sell their fare to the early morning workers. Spanish is spoken along with English in most quarters. A burgeoning music scene invites the city's youths to come out and enjoy themselves. Its nickname, El Chuco, is derived from the *pachucos*, the youths who brought zoot suits into fashion in the 1940s in both El Paso and Juárez, a style which went from there to Los Angeles (Castro 2000). People who have lived in the area for years talk about El Paso and Juárez as a unified metropolitan area, with a shared people, history, and culture. Long-time El Paso residents, regardless of race or ability to speak Spanish, recall how they used to go into Juárez frequently to catch a movie, go out to eat, or go shopping. But that was before the violence started. Only El Pasoans with strong family ties in Juárez still ventured over to visit relatives.

The inverse was also true: Juarenses talked about going into El Paso to buy goods they couldn't get in Mexico or to work at better paying jobs. Despite the long lines to cross the border into the United States and the hassles of crossing that didn't exist fifteen years ago, this trend continues in the present. Most civilians I met lamented the changes brought by the violence and the construction of the border fence. For instance, my housemate Ricardo, who grew up between Juárez and El Paso, noted that with "the younger generation having to grow up with [the border fence as an] icon, that's going to be weird. See, I didn't grow up with that icon. To me it was just like – you just crossed the bridge. That's it. Now, it's like so fucking militarized; it's like *Total Recall*<sup>10</sup> kind of shit, really sci-fi, you know. [...] Homeland Security, whatever they want to call it, have to check everyone. But when I was a kid, that wasn't much to worry about."

As someone who didn't grow up in El Paso or Juárez, the fence certainly seemed to separate two culturally similar, but physically different places. The streets of

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<sup>10</sup> *Total Recall* (1990) is a sci-fi movie directed by Paul Verhoeven, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rachel Ticotin, and Sharon Stone.

Juárez are dustier and more crowded than El Paso's. During the day, the streets bustle with some of Juárez's 1.3 million people rushing to their next destination (United Nations Statistics Division 2017), passing through downtown where the stench of rotting trash fills the air. Beyond downtown, Juárez features neighbourhoods of all types: slums for the dirt poor; functional dwellings for blue-collar factory workers; modest, single family homes for the middle class; and compounds with opulent mansions for the wealthy.

Compared to El Paso, with the exception of the mansions, the houses in Juárez are closer together, often side by side, like row houses, and smaller than their American counterparts. Besides their size and proximity to one another, the houses are distinguished by the metal bars that separate every pane of glass from the outside world. Though these bars wouldn't stop a well-placed bullet, they might deter a person from breaching the threshold they protect. As I walked down the road, I noticed the endless twisting barbed wire that adorned fences and some rooftops even on modest homes as well as the broken glass that was mixed into the concrete that crowned the security walls. In these Juarene neighbourhoods, I wasn't sure whether I was looking at a prison, a military compound, or somebody's home.

In 2009, just five years before my visit, Juárez was rated as the most violent city in the world (Vulliamy 2011). It maintained this position for the next three years running. Various sources tried to keep track of the death toll, and though the numbers differed, the message was the same: too many people were dying in Juárez. Undeniably, the drug trade was to blame for the thousands of lives lost annually (Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015, Shirk 2009). At the same time, across the border, El Paso was ranked as one of the safest cities in the United States (Borunda 2013).

When I arrived, Juárez seemed to be on an upswing. Violence still existed, but there was less. I was invited out one night by Esmeralda, an academic at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ). She was leading a research project that examined the reclaiming of the city's social spaces. Around 8:00 p.m., I crossed the bridge and jumped into the back of Esmeralda's car.

"Two years ago, I would never be out driving at this time," Esmeralda explained. "During the height of the violence from 2008 until 2011 or 2012, nobody went out at night unless they really had to or had some specific business. We had here in Juárez something that hadn't really existed in the town's history – people going home after work and spending time with their families."

“How did people decide it was safe to go out again?” I asked.

“There wasn’t a single thing that caused people to go out again all of a sudden. The government tried to change perception. Government officials would go on the news and say that there was less violence. Officials would parade statistics on the news saying there were fewer killings. And as people started to go out little by little, more people followed suit. And now, as you’ll see, families will be out on a Friday night once again.”

We went to several venues that evening to see that phenomenon. We started the night in an Applebee’s, a restaurant where middle class Mexicans can afford to eat. The prices were comparable to those of an El Paso’s Applebee’s. However, when converted to dollars and when the average monthly wage of \$200 (U.S.) is taken into consideration, the prices at the chain restaurant became downright exorbitant. Nonetheless, the restaurant was reasonably well attended with groups of friends and couples enjoying their Friday night.

The next stop was a fun fair. It was already dark when we arrived. Parking was a struggle. In the fair, live musicians played the hits of the past as families queued to buy pizza, hotdogs, *churros*, or *elotes*. Fathers took their sons and daughters on the carrousel while the older kids piled into the bumper cars to crash into each other at low speeds. On the adjacent baseball field, a group of kids were playing in the oldest continuing youth league in the city.

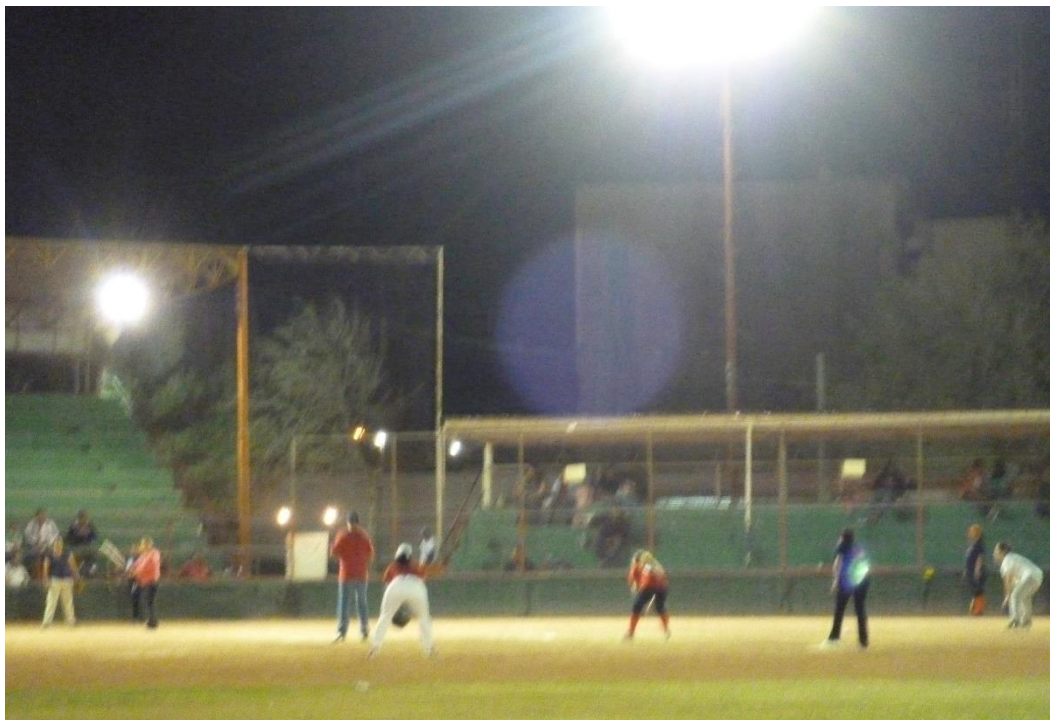


Photo 4: Children playing baseball in Ciudad Juárez.

We left to visit a row of clubs in the Zona Pronaf. Bouncers with thick necks and wrinkled faces sat at each club door, asking for our IDs. At the first club, some of the men in our group were frisked before we were allowed to enter and enjoy the promise of good music and atmosphere. But this club, like the parking lots across the way, was empty, so we left. The next three places had the same story albeit without the frisking – empty seats sat stagnantly in darkness. Americana decorated the walls in almost every location – a poster of a Rolling Stone magazine cover, a Confederate flag – as tunes played over thumping sound systems to empty dance floors. With nothing to see, we shared a litre bottle of beer and headed to another nearby area. We walked past more empty parking lots and darkened nightclubs that had not yet reopened or found new owners. Many of the local establishments that were open seemed empty as we peered through the windows.

Eventually, we came to a place where parking was indeed scarce. The San Martín Cantina Tradicional is, according to Esmeralda, “the most Mexican place in Juárez.” Not a table was empty. Two bands alternated, playing classic songs that everyone knew. Few bothered with conversation. Most folks were busy eating, drinking, or singing along with the music.

Slowly but surely the city was repairing its image. The refurbishment of the main drag was underway. Near the Santa Fe Street Bridge, the old, repurposed school busses, with tinted windows and hand-painted signs indicating their routes, waited for passengers. Street vendors and cabbies hawked their services along the road that leads up to the bridge. Sometimes, if they realized someone was American, they offered drugs or prostitutes.

### *JUÁREZ VICE*

A couple of blocks up from the exit of the Santa Fe Street Bridge, on the right side of the street, is the Kentucky Club, the birthplace of the margarita, and a reminder of the long history of smuggling and bootlegging in the Paso del Norte<sup>11</sup> area that has existed since at least Prohibition (Karson 2014, Campbell 2009). With the right kind of guide, knowhow, or *cojones* and luck, you can still satisfy all kinds of prohibited vices.

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<sup>11</sup> The El Paso/Juárez area.



Say the word and you are on your way to a shooting gallery. While shadowing Facundo<sup>12</sup>, a harm-reduction worker who supplied clean needles to help curb the spread of hepatitis and AIDS, I was taken to a shooting gallery where a gaunt man who went by the apt name of Flaquito invited us in. He darted out to buy his fix and left us with his cousin who was sitting on the couch. The cousin's abuse of *agua celeste*, a type of shoe glue commonly used by poor Juarenses to get high, had left him with permanent brain damage.

After a few minutes, Flaquito returned with two tiny packages wrapped in tin foil. Each was about the size of a pinkie nail, perhaps a quarter inch in diameter. He sat down on the dilapidated couch to begin the preparation process. He placed a crushed beer can upside down on his knee.

"The heroin users are called *tecatos* because they used crushed beer cans to prep their fix, and Tecate is probably the most commonly consumed beer, at least up here," Facundo later explained.

Flaquito carefully unwrapped his two tiny packages and put the contents in the well of the can. The little balls of heroin were a dark brown colour, almost black. From the package we gave him, he took a syringe. He removed the plunger and used it as a pestle to crush the little balls of *chiba* in the little well that the upside-down beer can offered. After about a minute, he took a package of distilled water and added it to the well. After another three to five minutes of mashing, the heroin was finally fully incorporated into the water and could be drawn with a needle. He took two syringes and drew half of the liquid into each, handing one to his brother, who disappeared into the other room.

In one fluid motion, Flaquito suddenly stood up, lifted up his baggy shirt and dropped his pants, exposing his pubic area. He then plunged the needle into his skin in the area adjacent to his pubic hair. On one side of his groin, there was significant

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<sup>12</sup> Facundo showed me around several neighbourhoods in Juarez that I could not have safely visited on my own. Every day, he covered several long routes, hauling a massive trash bag full of supplies. He allowed me to shadow him, since those at the harm reduction clinic thought it was important for me to see the neighbourhoods if I was to understand the situation. Being with Facundo would be safe, I thought; assailants don't generally attack community workers. Nonetheless, in September 2016, two years after he showed me around, I received the chilling news that Facundo was murdered for reasons unknown while leaving his home. The people who killed him will likely never be caught.

keloidal scarring from this practice. The scar ran vertically about three inches. He initially tried the other side of his body, but could not hit a vein. His plunger would not budge. He withdrew the syringe and plunged it into the bottom of his scar tissue, sticking himself twice before finding a vein successfully on the third attempt. He pushed the plunger in with a look of gusto on his face. He let the depressed syringe remain in his body for a few moments before removing it and throwing it casually away in the trash. He then tended to the bleeding wound he had just created for himself.

“That’s it,” Flaquito told me, with a grin on his face fitting of Gollum.

“So that will hold you over for the rest of today?” I asked him.

“No. I’ll try to inject myself 7, 8 times if I can. I’ll do whatever it takes to get that.”

“How much did each of those little *curas* cost you?”

“Each one is 60 pesos.” That’s about five dollars, a bit short of the daily minimum wage in Mexico (Gorbea 2015).

“So you spend about 40 bucks a day? How do you get the money?”

“I do what I need to get it.”

Flaquito didn’t elaborate. Undoubtedly, few licit options are available to him. Had he been a woman, Flaquito would likely have turned to prostitution to raise funds, which is quasi-legal and visible in red-light districts or in brothels in several Mexican border cities (Cepeda and Nowotny 2014). It took me a while to recognize the sex workers, but there were several working the streets of Juárez, many of whom were on the needle. They were there throughout the day, some with pregnant bellies and sunken faces in full display, trying to pick up johns.

One night at the Kentucky Club I met a retired American trucker named Sam. I struck up a conversation with him, and we started talking about women of the night and how nasty they seemed to look from their heavy drug use. Before I knew it, we were heading to a brothel where Sam said there were pretty girls. As we walked to the establishment, Sam gave me a little bit of background. The place in question, strictly speaking, was a bar. It used to be located somewhere else but it was shut down for whatever reason. It was “definitely controlled” by criminal interests – though exactly who, Sam wasn’t sure. And it was a great place to go to pick up a young, attractive woman, for a price of course, if that’s what your heart desired.

The place had a doorman, but unlike the Pronaf, he didn’t ask for ID or check us over. We walked in and found a medium-sized crowd. The music was loud, but not so

much so that you couldn't talk over it. The middle of the room featured a stripper pole where the girls would take turns dancing. However, there was no nudity; the most you would see would be the bikini the girls were wearing underneath their dresses. The bar extended over one entire wall. Sitting there were all kinds of men – black, white, Latino – and judging by some of the haircuts, some of them were probably soldiers from Fort Bliss. Speaking to them were young, attractive women.

I looked around and realized that all the women there were dressed the same way – in skin tight dresses that emphasized their figures without showing too much skin. Sam had a beer and we chit-chatted for a while.

“So, how much would someone expect to spend on a girl here?”

“If you went straight up to them, it would be about 80 bucks. They would get about 20 and pay the rest to the crime people. If you come in with a ‘tour guide,’ that is someone who has brought you here for a fee, then you'll likely get a discount and pay somewhere between 40 and 60 bucks. The girl's cut would be about the same, but here it's reasonably good money. What did I tell you though? They're pretty good looking, right?”

They were indeed. The women in there did not have track marks on their arms. Their faces weren't covered in pancake makeup to hide their ragged skin. They were of a healthy weight. An outsider could be forgiven for confusing them with any number of young women one might see on a university campus in College Town, USA. They looked just like the type of girl that a shy undergraduate might work up the nerve to talk to if he weren't such a coward, spinelessly ogling her from a dark, solitary corner. But here even cowards get attention. These girls will come right up and talk to anyone and everyone who walks through the door.

After about two sips of a beer, a young woman approached us to see if we were interested.

“I've seen you around here before,” she said to Sam.

“Yes. I come in from time to time. I'm just showing my friend ‘Ted’ around. Do you want a drink?”

She nodded yes and Sam bought her a beer. It was a little 20 mL bottle that the bartender promptly served. Sam went on to ask the escort about herself. Her name was Tiffany, a *gringa* name given that her father was Canadian. She was only twenty years old and already had a child. As her attention was called elsewhere, Sam pointed out one of her colleagues behind me.

“See that girl over there? She’s an E-Ticket. Do you know what an E-Ticket is?”

“No idea.”

“Well, when I was a kid and I went to Disneyland, you’d get a book of tickets: A, B, C all the way down to E. And guess what? You wanted that E-ticket because that got you on all the *best* rides. So my friend, check her out. A *bona fide* E-ticket! And I’ve taken that ride.”

“She looks awfully young. Is she as young as the other girl?”

“Well the E-ticket is 31. I’ve known her for 10 years. The others are probably in their twenties.”

Tiffany returned to us and chatted with Sam a bit longer. She was polite and charismatic, but Sam told her that he might be interested some other day, but not right now. He finished his beer and we got up to head back to Avenida Juárez for me to cross the bridge and for him to hit up another bar.

As we walked the three or four blocks from the bar to the main street, a police patrol crept up the street. We could tell without looking not because of their sirens but because of the flashing lights that reflected on the buildings in front of us.

“Keep walking at a good pace,” said Sam.

As we walked, the patrol approached us.

“Whatever you do, don’t look at them. If you look at them, they’ll definitely stop us and throw us up against the wall.”

The patrol passed us and turned left on the block ahead.

“Slow down, let’s make sure they get ahead of us,” Sam said. “It’s a one-way street, so they ain’t going to back track. Oh, okay – they’re around the corner. Let’s get on with it.”

We turned down Avenida Juárez and walked towards the bridge, pulling up shy of the bar Sam was about to enter.

“I’m going to go to the Yankee Bar. I’ll tell you something, given your interests and all. You see that bar up a bit further?”

“Yea.”

“Well, let me just say that I used to go there, but I won’t any more. Let me just say there is a lot of action here. All you have to do is look at what’s gone down in the different clubs. Over there, the Chess Club, there were all kinds of murders. When that shit goes down, normally the clubs get shut down. Did the Chess? Fuck no!

“One last piece of advice, if you see some guys riding their bikes around you and they’ve got walkie-talkies, watch out, ‘cause they are going to fuck you up. Any case, that’s all I’ve got to say. Good luck, kid.”

And with that Sam walked into the Yankee and I walked across the bridge, got into the red pickup, and drove home.



Photo 5: Coming and Going: The Santa Fe Bridge with a view into El Paso.

### THREE: BIGGER FISH TO FRY

#### *THE SKY IS FALLING!?*

Alien threat narratives are nothing new; politicians have been using the fears of the unknown to develop political capital and push their favoured policies for ages. Many immigrant populations, from the Irish and the Italians to the Mexicans and, most recently, the Syrians, have been cast as, what Stan Cohen (2002) called, “folk devils” by political actors in search of an electoral boost. The narratives are eerily similar regardless of the object of their ire, and they ebb and flow according to political and practical convenience. When times are plentiful and labour is in short supply, policy seeks to augment the workforce with cheap labour. When times are difficult and labour outpaces demand, immigrants morph into “Schrödinger’s immigrant” (Hatjoulis 2015) – the immigrant who is simultaneously stealing jobs while lounging around on welfare, leeching off of society – or deadly killers who bring disease and/or violence with them. It’s a narrative that conveniently bridges immigrant threats with the pernicious presence of organized crime (Smith Jr 1975).

For the better part of the past century, Latinos have disproportionately been the objects of such narratives in the United States which cast Latin American migrants, particularly those from Mexico and Central America, as “‘illegals’ [...] who take jobs from natives, depress wages, burden taxpayers, increase crime rates, and pose a threat to national unity and regional identity” (Lacy and Odem 2009, 143-44). The use of these negative terms fosters a sense of sustained hostility towards unauthorized immigrants and turns them into political scapegoats (Tinessa 2010, Welch 2002).

With the fall of the Twin Towers, U.S. territorial security became a central political issue. Since Latino migrants could not be scapegoated for the attack, the focus on immigrants widened to other nationalities: the emerging threat discourse presented all unauthorized immigrants as a threat to both America’s domestic economy and security (Kanstroom 2004, Smith III 2006). Accordingly, the failure to secure the borders from the Al-Qaida attackers (and later the imminent threat from possible ISIS attackers) led to domestic anxieties that a genuine personal, physical security threat existed. Yet, the old Latino scapegoats were not forgotten. As narcoviolence in Mexico increased and as the U.S. government prioritized securing its borders, elements of the news media, political pundits, and politicians broadly labelled the Latino migrant population as including the worst kind of (likely) criminals – kidnappers, drug dealers, rapists,

murderers, and terrorists (Addady 2016, Geisler 2011, Hickman and Suttorp 2008). The discourse created “policy and practice [that] equate[d] illicit crossings with national-security risks and the ever-present threat of terrorism” (McNevin 2011, 56-57).

Given that backdrop, I decided to cast a line and see if I could fish out some of the drug trafficking types that were supposedly being processed in the Immigration Courts. Being in the American southwest and literally next to the border, I was in as good a place as any to see who the Border Patrol<sup>13</sup> caught. Such an experience would show me if those who peddle the Latino threat narrative were sages spreading wisdom or merely Chicken Littles<sup>14</sup>. Plus, it gave me the time I needed to get to know El Paso and Juárez before I could *really* start looking underwater.

### *BARRIERS TO ACCESS*

I called in advance before my first visit to Immigration Court. The woman on the phone told me that I could come in and observe the immigration proceedings; I would have no problem. I would need ID to enter and I couldn't record anything. There would be some cases from which I would be excluded, but generally speaking I could attend as long as court was in session. With no evident barriers to my observing, I drove over to the El Paso detainee immigration court that afternoon. The court is located at the migrant detention centre, a place colloquially known as “the camp,” in the eastern part of town. As I pulled in, the armed, private security guards who were checking vehicles as they entered the compound were completely taken off-guard by my request to observe the court: “No one told us you were coming.”

“I called ahead, and was told I could just come down,” I responded.

“Who did you talk to?”

“I don't know. I called the public number on the DoJ<sup>15</sup> website and the woman on the other end said I could come whenever I wanted to.”

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<sup>13</sup> Customs and Border Patrol are referred to collectively as CBP. There are two separate units. Customs checks people and items as they cross into the U.S.; Border Patrol patrols the borders for illicit entry.

<sup>14</sup> Chicken Little, also known as Henny Penny, is a folk tale that warns against mass hysteria. The protagonist warns all around him that “the sky is falling,” thinking that the world is coming to an end. He is wrong.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Justice

The guards told me that I should always take down a name and contact number to get authorization. I pulled up to let the other cars pass through as the guards called into the court to see whether I could enter. As I waited, I saw a torrent of vehicles arrive with DHS license plates. All around me was a sea of border patrol vehicles, maybe a couple hundred of them. The one-storey, beige buildings of the complex were islands protruding from that sea.

The guards were friendly enough. They chatted to me about the size of the county, the different roles law enforcement bodies in the borderlands play, and the other detention facilities nearby.

“You should check out the facility up at Otero County – up along U.S. 54. It has U.S. Marshalls and ICE together. It’s totally different from here.”

Eventually the guards’ phone rang and permission to observe the immigration proceedings was granted. I thanked the guards for their kindness and went to the Department of Justice’s Executive Office of Immigration (EOIR) building where the administrative court was located. The general treatment I received on my first day at the detention centre is incongruent with the legal code which outlines public access to hearings<sup>16</sup> and the relevant section in the Immigration Court Practice Manual<sup>17</sup> (Executive Office for Immigration Review 2009).

To be fair, all individual hearings can be blocked if the judge chooses to do so; it is his or her right according to statute. Nonetheless, it seems clear, that at least in the El Paso Detention Center, the guards are unaware of this policy. Their actions seem to undermine the exercise of discretion by the judges, who, without exception, welcomed me to observe their courts. Their attitudes seem to echo the sentiment expressed by the (Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts n.d.) that “[b]y conducting their judicial work in public view, judges enhance public confidence in the courts, and they allow citizens to learn first-hand how our judicial system works.” No matter how well intentioned, the guards’ actions certainly seem to add opacity to a process that is meant to be transparent.

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<sup>16</sup> 8 C.F.R. § 1003.27 Aliens and Nationality. *Code of Federal Regulations*. United States: Legal Information Institute.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix A



Sometimes the guards' actions not only obscured the judicial process but also infringed on the rights of the respondents. On that first day, I wasn't the only person who had trouble getting into the court. An attorney from California who was representing a respondent detained in El Paso was not permitted to enter and was not given any guidance as to where to register for his appearance. Upon hearing about this issue, the judge, William Lee Abbot, turned to the bailiff, a man who had been working there for several years, and said, "Can you tell those knuckleheads the rule? We need to make this process as transparent as possible. If someone wants to observe, they can do that. They can come right in. It's supposed to be open to the public."

That occurrence was one that occasionally repeated itself, particularly in detained settings or when I returned to the same court but different guards were on duty. It seemed that irrespective of what policies were published on the DOJ's website, there were house rules that needed to be obeyed, which meant that there was a variable degree of access and transparency across all of the courts that I observed.

Once I was inside the courts, I would get different explanations from the administrators. Some would tell me that I could observe what I wanted to so long as the judge didn't close the hearing. Others would say that access would depend on whether the respondents or, if they had representation, their counsels would allow me to observe. It was clear to me that outside visitors were unusual since I was often asked who I was and what I was doing. I was commonly mistaken for either an attorney, law student, or, sometimes in the non-detained dockets, as a respondent. I seldom saw other observers. Once there was a journalist and once there was a group of law students. In Phoenix, the courtrooms were so full at the start of the day that at times it was hard to find a seat or even enter the courtroom. But, generally, the barriers I faced involved private security, comparable to the issues I faced on my first day, or being subjected to house rules, restrictions that seemed to be in place at a given court for whatever reason.

Everything told, I observed 16 judges in 6 different courts: El Paso, Texas (detained and non-detained); San Antonio, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; Eloy, Arizona; and Denver, Colorado. I spent over one hundred hours observing across all the courts. I observed as many of the judges as possible; some were on leave during the times that I visited. Most of the hearings I observed were master calendar hearings and bond hearings. I did observe a few special dockets, one that involved people who were remotely detained, another which involved men who were about to finish their criminal

sentences, one that featured unaccompanied minors, and a docket which involved women and their children. In total, I observed hundreds of master calendar hearings, dozens of bond hearings, and three asylum hearings, though I was not privy to the final decisions. I managed to have a few informal chats with the judges after the dockets were over, but they said they could not talk to me in the context of a formal interview. Occasionally, I would chat with government attorneys, who would offer some brief insight concerning their work. I met and talked with several immigration attorneys, but only interviewed four of them formally, given their lack of knowledge about the kinds of criminal actors I was interested in.

### *TYPICAL CASES*

Immigration hearings usually occur in small, rectangular rooms that recall casinos in that they are places where some people strike it lucky but most don't. The large clock on the wall offers a sense of time, under unforgiving florescent lighting. Behind the judge's bench there is wood panelling, a Department of Justice seal, and an American flag. The other walls are all white and bare unless the judge chooses to decorate the room. The tasks are repetitive and monotonous. Many of the cases seem to be almost the same. Sometimes a case comes along that deviates from the norm, adding slight variety.

A judge must make life-changing and sometimes life-shattering decisions. As one immigration judge put it, they are "paid the big bucks to make hard decisions that many others would not want to make." It seems that, at times, no matter what the judges do, they cannot please everyone – the public, the respondents, the politicians, and sometimes even themselves – particularly when they must reject people who they would prefer not to reject. That being said, the same judge underscored that immigration judges are not pressured to deport people: "We're not. We – especially those of us appointed since 2008<sup>18</sup> – just try to follow the rules. [...] When people fail to get relief, it's usually because their reason doesn't qualify them for it."

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<sup>18</sup> Prior to 2008, Immigration Judges were generally appointed without public competition for the position, often based on political ties, and without regard to past immigration law experience. Guadalupe Gonzalez, who was the top government immigration attorney in El Paso, was appointed to the bench in 2010. However, she had been passed over on several occasions for lesser qualified candidates. She sued the U.S. Attorney General; and a U.S. District Court

The average court scene varies little in the detention setting. A bailiff ushers the detained respondents in for their hearing. They are not handcuffed or otherwise restrained. Sometimes the detainees are separated by gender; other times they are separated by whether or not they have legal representation. They are almost always unified in their silent and still demeanour, looking like crayons sitting in their box. The colours of the jumpsuits the respondents wear tell a story in and of themselves. In the El Paso court, navy blue uniforms indicate that the respondents have no association with crime. People who are detained at a point of entry are invariably dressed in this colour as are those who have never been accused or convicted of a criminal offence in the U.S. Orange indicates that the individuals so dressed may have charges pending against them or may have been convicted of a minor crime. Red, which isn't terribly common in the detention centre, designates a person who has been convicted of a serious crime, such as a Class A misdemeanour, the most serious class, or any felony conviction that might result in removability. Other courts use similar but different colour coding.

The scene I saw in Judge Abbott's court would be typical of what I would see time and again over the months of observing master calendar hearings on the immigration courts' detained dockets both in Texas and in Arizona. The judge summarized the process at hand for the benefit of the people who were about to have their cases reviewed, known in immigration court as respondents. Addressing the respondents directly, he went through their rights. He was explicit and clear, leaving ample time for the translator to do her work efficiently. He told the respondents that they have a right to have an attorney, but at no cost to the government. Judge Abbott went on to tell them that if they do not have an attorney, they should have been given

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Judge, Emmet G. Sullivan, determined that Gonzalez had demonstrated that there had been a pattern of discrimination. Both of the men appointed to the bench before her, Robert Hough and Thomas Roepke, had less experience than Gonzalez (2006). As a result of the ruling, "immigration judges are considered civil service employees who may not be chosen based on political factors, unlike judges in federal criminal courts" (Goldstein and Eggen 2007).

Notably, when immigration attorneys expressed disdain for any particular judge, Roepke was the usual target, as he seldom granted asylum and was seen as a political appointee. In my conversations with immigration attorneys, judges were deemed "good" if they had better asylum approval rates. Nonetheless, from what I observed, due process was taken seriously by all judges; no judge wants his or her cases to be overturned with any degree of frequency. Moreover, Roepke's high rejection rate can be explained, in part, by his handling of a docket of convicted felons, who have little relief available to them.

a list of attorneys who might help them pro-bono; nonetheless, there are no guarantees that they could find one. That first day, nearly all of the detainees were having their first hearing. The judge told them that they, as such, have the right to reschedule their hearing in order to have time to find an attorney or prepare their case. They also have the right to testify (or not) on their own behalf. And, finally, they have the right to appeal to the Board of Immigration Appeals if they are dissatisfied with the judge's decision.

With his lips hidden behind his Texas-sized moustache, Judge Abbott spoke with a calm and even demeanour. He remained so throughout the entire afternoon, regardless of the outcomes of the cases, or how many times he was asked to repeat or rephrase what he had just said. Judge Abbott had a warmth to his voice and seemed to express empathy for each person whose case he decided, always leaving them with the phrase, "Be careful and good luck to you." As the afternoon went on, he kept to schedule but did not seem hurried. He smiled and occasionally joked. At times, for the benefit of the attorneys present, he would comment on the legal limitations which bound his decisions and, for the detainee whose case he was considering, he would present the legal reasoning behind his decision. Not all of the judges had his warmth, his patience, or engaged in explaining the legal reasoning behind his decisions, but all judges seemed to be committed to being clear and to upholding the law.

Due process was important to all of the judges I managed to speak to. Despite their massive workloads and, in El Paso, their internal goals of case completion, there were several instances where a judge refused to proceed with a case because the court did not have an interpreter in the respondent's native tongue, something that would happen at an initial master calendar hearing if a person was not a native Spanish or English speaker. Some, but not all, of the judges were aware that many indigenous people who come from Latin America do not speak Spanish natively. Occasionally, the interpreters would identify issues in communication and flag these issues to the judges. Overall, a majority of the immigration judges I observed seemed to have the respondents' best interests in mind, given the limits of the law. What Judge Guadalupe Gonzalez told me was echoed by other judges who talked to me and was supported by what I often saw in court: "It is the responsibility of the court to ensure due process. We need to explain to the respondents the nature of the proceeding. We need to be proactive in protecting their rights. But once someone is represented by an attorney,

the attorney takes all of that responsibility. The attorney is obligated by the attorney-client privilege to protect their client's rights."

"Does it happen that an attorney fails to protect their client's rights? What do you do?" I asked. Another judge had commented on the low quality of many of the immigration attorneys, saying bluntly that many were lousy.

"I've had situations when attorneys are not as well versed in the law as they should be. Sometimes, I, or even the government counsel, will tell the respondent's counsel about the relief available. It's the attorney's ethical duty to know the law required to represent someone fully. Sometimes not everyone is adequately versed in the law necessary to represent their clients successfully," Judge Gonzalez explained. "I try to maintain an atmosphere in court where respondents are comfortable. They need to feel like they can tell their story fully."

Yet, despite such precautions, it seemed that anywhere from a fifth to a third of the respondents in the detained setting – typically middle-aged, Mexican men – simply asked to be deported, even when they had voluntary departure or possibly other relief available to them. The claim that I heard from some of the immigration attorneys, that such respondents just want to leave the camp, didn't seem to make much sense when Mexicans requested it since how repatriation occurs in terms of process and cost is indistinguishable between the two processes. Even in the face of such requests, judges would exhaust their protocol to ensure the person made the request knowingly and with complete understanding of its future consequences before issuing a deportation order. Occasionally, the repeated questioning of the respondent to determine whether s/he wanted to be removed would reveal that the respondent had failed to understand his or her situation. In such situations, the judge would rule for a continuation of the case rather than a deportation order.

One judge reflecting on respondents' requests for deportation said that "we go wrong if we pretend we know what's better for them. Our job is to tell the respondents what their options are and what the consequences of their choices are. Who are we to tell them to sit in detention a while longer if they don't want to because we think it is in their best interest?" What's more, it makes it hard for judges who see such events every single day in their courtrooms to believe that there are imminent threats to individuals returning when a high percentage, I would estimate perhaps half, ask to return immediately.

The clear majority of the cases, on both the detained and non-detained dockets, that I observed involved respondents who had committed only immigration-related crimes. Many had been picked up shortly after their crossing attempts, but long enough after crossing to warrant an appearance before an immigration judge rather than a mere turnback<sup>19</sup>. Others had been detained after a DUI arrest or some misdemeanour offence. On any given day on the non-detained docket, I saw nothing which would suggest that the respondents were criminally involved, which made sense given that they had made bond. Even on the detained docket, on any given day, I would see one or maybe two respondents dressed in a jumpsuit that would indicate that they had committed a removable offence. When the judges drilled down into their histories, they learned that some had committed a violent criminal offense, but few seemed to be significant players in the drug trade or some other criminal enterprise.

### *THE BADDIES*

Once, I was observing a “reason-to-believe-drug-trafficker<sup>20</sup>” hearing with a respondent who had been brought in from the Otero Country Processing Center to have his hearing in person since the communications system was down. During a break in the proceedings, the Otero guards who had accompanied the respondent to El Paso struck up a conversation with me, asking me about my research. They told me that, a few months earlier, they had the Reina del Pacífico, Sandra Ávila Beltrán (b. 1960)<sup>21</sup>, and another high-ranking member of the Sinaloa cartel in their custody. Beltrán and her associate had been quickly and quietly deported back to Mexico.

“The Reina was a woman in her late forties, early fifties<sup>22</sup>,” one of the guards recounted. “She looked good for her age, but after lots of plastic surgery. I guess with

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<sup>19</sup> “‘Turnbacks’ are defined as, ‘A subject who, after making an illegal entry into the U.S., returns to the country from which he/she entered, not resulting in an apprehension or gotaway [an escape]’” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Within the Immigration Court, if a government attorney can show that there is reason to believe that a respondent is either a drug trafficker or a money launderer, the respondent can be denied relief. According to one judge in the El Paso court, the reason-to-believe-money-laundering charge is never pursued by DHS attorneys.

<sup>21</sup> Sandra Ávila Beltrán is the niece of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (b. 1946), the founder of the Guadalajara Cartel. She pleaded guilty to being an accessory after the fact in aiding cocaine traffickers in the U.S. and was convicted on money laundering charges in Mexico (Shoichet 2013).

<sup>22</sup> She would have been 53 at that time.

that kind of money [from drug trafficking] you can buy your looks. People said that we shouldn't say anything to her. With just a phone call, she might be able to get us killed."

Yet, the guards are not supposed to know who they are transporting. Moreover, they receive no additional training to deal with sensitive persons, as everyone is to be treated equally.

"We were told to drive them and not ask questions. We handed them over to the Mexican authorities. After that, they are the Mexican government's business. We never did find out what happened to them."

The guards managed to learn that the woman they had been guarding was Beltrán because colleagues in the detention facility whispered that she had been there. Later, her presence was confirmed in the press (ICE Newsroom 2013). She was deported after serving time.

"Her quick departure," the guard opined, "is typical of big players in the drug game. They never stick around. Their cases are always quick. They ask for deportation and get the order over with. That way, there is less of a chance for the FBI or whoever else to interrogate them or even watch them. Maybe in Mexico they have enough reach that their money can buy their freedom or at least a comfortable amount of space in order to live without too many restrictions."

During my time in immigration court, I never saw any big shots of the criminal underworld appear in immigration court – at least based on the court proceedings I witnessed and the information that was disclosed within them. I observed a docket in which respondents were all men convicted of a felony, all of whom were ordered deported. It is possible that some of these men were large-scale traffickers, but most accepted deportation, and the details of their crimes were not reviewed. Only in one case did significant details come out. The respondent, a former legal permanent resident, had been caught with six kilos of meth in his vehicle as he tried to cross into the U.S. from Mexico. Such a quantity didn't make him a Chapo Guzmán or anything close to being a drug kingpin. He could have been a typical wholesale trafficker, who on the grand scale of things would be a small or medium level trafficker depending on the frequency with which he actually trafficked drugs; or, he could have been a decoy used to draw attention from a bigger load being trafficked behind him.

Yet, immigration courts have played a role in the emergence of American-style street and prison gangs in Mexico and Central America. Gattopardo, a born-again Christian, ex-Sureño gang member who was in Los Angeles in the 1980s, recounted how

the notorious Calle 18 and MS-13 gangs were born in the streets of L.A. As these gang members were deported back to El Salvador, following felony convictions, they regrouped and started to gangbang again (Manwaring 2007, 2011). They soon became transnationals, maintaining their ties not only to the places from where they were deported but also to the places to where they were deported. Special Agent Diana Apodaca, the public information officer for the DEA in El Paso told me that this was the case with the Mexicles, the gang that is associated with the Sinaloa Cartel in Juárez, who “[u]pon their release and deportation [...] continued their criminal activities in Mexico, eventually forming an alliance with the Artistas Asesinos, aka Doble A’s and Doblados, in Ciudad Juárez.”

My housemate Ricardo, who spent part of his childhood growing up in Juárez, likewise saw the effects of these deportations during his boyhood after some gang members were deported back to Mexico from Texas.

“Once [the Ortiz brothers] got out of jail, [the U.S. authorities] tossed them into Juárez,” Ricardo recalled. “And six months later, all I see all over the fucking Juárez streets is Ortiz gang, Ortiz gang and I was like fuck – Juárez is going to start getting all gangster like I saw it in LA; and sure enough, the cartel blew up, and I saw a lot of little gangsters running around.”

However, when I did see alleged gang affiliations come up in immigration court, it seemed that DHS attorneys mischaracterized respondents as being involved with drug trafficking or gangs. A man who had been brought from Otero, Ruy Lopez, fit this bill. Lopez was facing drug possession charges, but his attorney said that those charges would be dropped. As the case unfolded, the judge in the case, Stephen Ruhle, seemed sceptical that Lopez was a drug trafficker, telling the government attorney that: “The respondent has only two arrests and no convictions. He’s been here for seventeen years. If he was involved with bad things, it’s unlikely that he would be in the U.S. for such a long time without getting into any trouble.” After interviewing the respondent and evaluating the facts of the case, Judge Ruhle eventually ruled that there was no reason to believe that Lopez was a drug trafficker and granted him bond so that he could attend to his criminal court case.

Another case in front of Judge Ruhle involved a man dressed in an orange jumpsuit, indicating that he had some conviction that could condemn him to removability. Judge Ruhle started the hearing, as he commonly did with respondents dressed in orange or red, by asking what the respondent’s criminal history was. The



government attorney responded by saying that the respondent had a gang affiliation, and not just any gang, but MS-13, a prison gang that has a ruthless reputation nationally but a non-existent presence in the El Paso area. It was an odd claim because given his age, had the man been indeed a Mara Salvatrucha member, he would have likely had some visible tattoos. He had none. Judge Ruhle looked at the man's file and saw that he had been granted bond previously. In fact, he was the judge who had granted it. Judge Ruhle turned to the government attorney and explained that if he had granted bond previously, he did not believe the man was criminally involved with anything. The respondent spoke in his own defence, repudiating the government attorney's claim. Yes, he had a juvenile record. He had associated with his brother, who is in fact a gang member. But he never got seriously involved. Plus, he had a family and a job now, not to mention the fact that he hadn't heard from his brother for more than three years.

The respondent had his bond revoked for disorderly conduct and possession of marijuana. The judge told him that most people don't get bond initially and (almost) nobody gets it twice. The respondent was scheduled for a hearing at the end of the month, and so the judge decided that it would be in the respondent's best interest to remain in the detention centre so that he could have his case heard and decided upon quickly. Had he been bonded out, it would have taken about two and a half years for his case to be heard on the non-detainee docket.

The respondent accepted Judge Ruhle's decision without protest. The judge advised the man to have his wife and anybody else to show up to support his character, but, the judge warned the respondent that he shouldn't "bring them if they don't have status – they won't leave. You have two possible conclusions that have very different connotations. If the judge believes you, then it will be positive and if she doesn't then it won't. The more people you have to support your character the better; it carries more weight in court than just you or your wife."

The man thanked the judge for his advice and left the courtroom. After he left, the judge lightly scolded the attorney by saying, "I didn't believe he was a gang member: your case was 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.' I'm not buying that argument."

Sporadically, there would be a respondent who had been convicted of a drug crime or some other disqualifying felony which would mean that no relief was available. Yet, even as these crimes were discussed in the court, these people were, at best, low

level distributors – individuals who may have been involved in a gang but not on the ground, pushing dope on the street. One such case in Judge Gonzalez’s court featured a young Mexican man, likely brought to the U.S. as baby, for he spoke perfect English with a Midwestern accent. He had been convicted on two separate occasions – once for credit card fraud and a second time for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute. The judge examined his records and told him outright that he had no relief available as he had been convicted of two separate crimes and one of those was an aggravated felony. The man accepted his deportation but asked about his future prospects for returning to the U.S.

“If you accept my order as final, you will receive a lifetime ban to return,” Judge Gonzalez told him. Resigned to his fate, the young man accepted the judge’s decision. The bailiff led him back to the detention centre to await his eminent deportation.

Once, and only once, did I see someone in a non-detained setting be accused of drug trafficking. That occurred in Wendell A. Hollis’ Phoenix courtroom. The respondent in question, an overweight Mexican man, was trying to file for asylum. The DHS attorney indicated that he was not eligible for it, for there was reason to believe that the respondent was a drug trafficker. All he could lodge was a Convention Against Torture (CAT) claim, which is often even harder than asylum to get. It seemed curious that the respondent had been granted bond, and that the bond had not been revoked given such a finding. The respondent’s attorney contested the idea that the man had committed a “particularly serious crime” that would bar him from asylum. He wanted time to prepare a defence of that claim. The judge decided to ask for briefs from both parties in which they would present their cases in writing; he would decide on the merits of the case in a future hearing. The respondent walked out of the courtroom still on bond.

One judge explained to me that to constitute a valid CAT claim, “torture has to be *by* the government.” The number of involved government agents it takes to bind the whole government to complicity in the torture is a point of current debate. Part of the consideration judges make in these circumstances involves the steps that a government takes to crack down on such abuses. Nationals who come from countries where a good faith effort is being made to tackle such abuses typically do not qualify for protection under the Convention Against Torture. Respondents must show a 50.1 per cent risk that they will be tortured *by the government* of the country to which they will be deported. This provision doesn’t cover criminal groups. However, a 2009 decision by the 8<sup>th</sup> Circuit

Court of Appeals, *Ramirez-Peyro v. Holder*<sup>23</sup>, suggests that even one government actor can bind the government if that person acts under the “color of law,” that is, if that actor uses official government resources to commit an act of torture, even when the state does not condone or sanction the act. But the judge noted, many of the immigration attorneys fail to present such cases and the necessary arguments in court.

#### *THE LATINO THREAT NARRATIVE IN IMMIGRATION COURT*

From what I saw in immigration court, the sky is not falling; only a handful of acorns are landing on us. Yet, one judge at the Eloy, Arizona, facility told me that, “We see drug traffickers all the time,” shortly after a respondent, a woman who had been convicted of possessing drugs with the intent to sell, appeared in court. What seemed unclear to me was the extent to which large-scale traffickers were going through the court and what “all the time” meant. It is possible that anyone who had been convicted with possession with the intent to distribute is considered a trafficker. Perhaps that is true, strictly speaking, but it certainly does not mean that those individuals are part of a drug trafficking organization. When drugs did come up, the amounts were in the tens of pounds of marijuana or a few kilos of hard drugs. Even if there were a respondent in every group who was a drug trafficker, the number over all would be around five per cent. However, in my observations, I failed to see anywhere near that number, even using the loosest definitions for what a trafficker could be, even in Eloy where more criminal respondents are processed.

Nonetheless, from the off-the-record conversations I had with some of the judges, the judges indicated that they routinely see respondents convicted for large trafficking loads. Yet, my efforts to see such cases came up largely empty. It is possible that such events stick out in the judges’ minds given that they stick out from the mountains of routine cases they see. It would appear that the Otero guard’s view that big players seek quick deportation is likely true. Moreover, those who are convicted of serious crimes have little relief available to them, outside of a CAT claim, meaning that many are likely deported directly from prison or shortly after serving their time, the details of their cases never coming into play as their hearings unfold.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ramirez - Peyro v. Holder*, 574 F.3d 893, 900-01 (8th Cir. 2009)

Yet, serious criminals do not seem to represent a large proportion of the cases. Based on what I saw, the clear majority of respondents are in the system purely for immigration offences with a minority arrested for misdemeanour criminal offences and an even smaller number of respondents convicted for felony criminal offences. That being said, there are so many cases that the immigration system is overwhelmed. There are more cases than can be dealt with in a timely manner, especially when cases are referred to the non-detained docket.

Another problem immigration courts face is a lack of clarity in the narratives that are peddled within them. Some of the claims immigration advocates and attorneys made regarding the biases held by various judges and the harshness of the courts did not square with my experiences. Given the number of people who requested immediate deportation during their initial master calendar hearing, one must infer that the risk these respondents face in returning home must be minimal if so many are requesting imminent return.

Moreover, there were times when immigration attorneys presented conflicting evidence to support their client's immigration claims. For instance, in San Antonio, where many of the respondents were Salvadorian, attorneys would claim that the MS-13 and the Calle 18 gangs, historical enemies, were not only in cahoots with the leftist government but also threatening the respondent. It was a claim that, on the surface, did not seem to make sense. How inept would a government that is struggling to maintain power have to be to co-opt two gangs and then allow them to continue to be in conflict with one another? Subjecting immigration judges to such paradoxical presentations makes it difficult for the judges to make informed and fair decisions, since they are likely to be dubious of both claims.

#### *VAGUE THREATS AND "COMMON CRIMINALITY"*

Though members of gangs and drug trafficking organizations seldom appeared in person during immigration proceedings, they were often talked about and clearly impacted people who were going through the courts. Nearly all of the Latin Americans I observed who attempted to lodge an asylum claim cited threats from DTOs or gangs, depending on whether they were from Mexico or Central America, respectively. (I never saw a respondent from South America.) Despite the frequency of these tales and their importance in terms of being able to lodge a successful asylum claim, respondents often recounted the threats they received vaguely to the court.

This vagueness was highlighted in a credible fear hearing. The detainee, a man named Cristiano, had attempted to establish that he and his family faced a credible physical threat if he were to return to Mexico. He had been interviewed by an asylum agent, who rejected his claim, so now he appealed for a hearing in front of Judge Sunita Mahtabfar who was to re-examine that decision and determine whether the man would be subject to deportation.

At the opening of the hearing, Judge Mahtabfar, as a courtesy, allowed Cristiano's attorney to make a brief statement before the facts of the case were reviewed. In addition, Cristiano had an opportunity to respond on his own behalf. The attorney simply said that, given the recent social history in Mexico, he hoped the court would side with his client. Then the judge went through the claimed facts.

The detainee's story to the court was as follows. One day, out of the blue, some six masked men came to Cristiano's home and asked him to work for them. He refused, so these masked men began to beat him. After about ten minutes, they fled when someone outside the house called out that the military was approaching. After the incident, Cristiano called the local police, who said they would respond in about two hours. Rather than waiting, he packed up what he could and fled with his family almost immediately. He drove to the border, battered and bruised, where he requested entry. In the days after his departure, neighbours told his family members that men had come and looted his house, taking everything away. Through it all, Cristiano did not know who the men were; their masks concealed their identities.

Cristiano's claim was vague, and he did not choose to go into further detail. The judge asked him several times to elaborate on who he thought the men were, but Cristiano did not offer any further details. Like the asylum officer, the judge ruled against the man's claim. He had failed to meet the burden of proof necessary to establish that he faced a credible threat should he be deported back to Mexico.

One judge would later tell me that the law does not allow an immigration judge to read into the facts. The description Cristiano gave is consistent with criminal actors affiliated in some way with drug trafficking organizations. His account of the police's timeframe is consistent with reports that the police lollygag to give assassins time to kill. None of these details were presented to the court.

The decision resulted in the man moving a step closer to deportation. After it was handed down, Cristiano's attorney chatted with the judge briefly. He asked the

judge if the court doesn't view that kind of violence as a credible threat, with all that's been going on in Mexico.

"No," was the judge's response. The respondent was vague; there weren't enough details to establish his case.

The attorney alleged to the judge that his client, the respondent, gave a lot more detail when speaking privately with him. Important details had not come out in court. "There was no opportunity for me to cross-examine him, so that stuff remained outside of the court."

The judge acknowledged that problem and suggested that the attorney might yet be able to help his client. The judge later explained that recruitment is not a valid basis upon which to establish a credible threat, and the man had failed to show that there was anything else going on beyond an attempt to recruit him into a criminal group. Moreover, the man had a criminal record and had been deported several times before, which made it difficult to find relief for him.

This episode had several hallmarks of what I observed with Mexicans seeking asylum throughout the courts I observed. First, there was a claim that some organized criminal group, usually one of the better known DTOs or a group assumed to be associated with such organizations, was attempting to harm them. Second, the details of the threats or past events were vague, with no positive identification or clear motives disclosed. Sometimes, the respondents would blame the state as being complicit. Third, there was some element in the case which would result in an unsuccessful asylum claim, given the rules of asylum, should the claim be evaluated in full.

Immigration attorney and University of Texas academic Denise Gilman explained to me why vagueness is so common in Latin American asylum claims: "[T]hese are very truncated procedures. I really, truly have seen a lot of cases that look really bad at the beginning; and then once we spend hours and hours and hours with people, you know, going through their stories, by the end the judges – when we present [the cases] – the judge is like, 'You guys take all the easy cases.' I'm like, 'No, that's not the way it works.' People don't know what's relevant. People don't know what kind of specificity [is needed to be successful in their claim]. People don't know what kind of documents the judges are expecting to get. They don't necessarily narrate in Western-style chronological order. So, that's one thing.

“And then [...] sometimes those credible fear interviews take place pretty quickly, so people are still out of it. They don’t really understand what’s going on. They may have suffered trauma. So, they’re not really in a very good position to be able to tell their story.”

The need to effectively tell the story is important. “Harm alone is insufficient to grant asylum,” Judge Abbott told me after a woman had presented her case *pro se* (without an attorney) and attempted to request asylum on the basis that she was being extorted by the Caballeros de Templar in Michoacán. According to Judge Abbott, the case law is clear, and the accepted reasons to substantiate asylum claims are narrow and specific. The law considers victimization from “common crime” insufficient grounds for granting asylum. Plus, a lot of people fail in their asylum claims because individuals have a responsibility to move internally to avoid their problems, or they fail to satisfy some other requirement that the asylum law requires of asylum seekers. Applicants’ claims must be made on specific grounds and evidenced; claimants must establish that they face assured harm based upon someone hating their race, religion, political opinion (defined broadly as anything to do with governance), nationality, or membership to a specific social group. While all of these requirements seem straightforward, in the eyes of the law, proving these cases is not.

### *MEXICO THROUGH THE LENS OF IMMIGRATION COURT*

“Roughly two per cent of those who were seeking asylum from Mexico in 2012 received it. So, that tells you that just not here in El Paso, but across the nation, how folks from Mexico who are seeking asylum are viewed,’ explained Katie Hudak, the outgoing director of Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center. “There have been things in the U.S. Congress – you know – some people feel that some Mexicans are coming in, asking for asylum but are really seeking some other form of immigration relief so [some politicians may believe that] folks are playing the system. [...] We hear things like Mexico’s a democratic country, [so] why would anybody be seeking asylum from Mexico? They’re one of our biggest trading partners; they’re trying to do something about the violence that is occurring in Mexico.”

What Ms. Hudak described remain significant hurdles for Mexican asylum seekers. One judge, speaking to me anonymously, explained that Immigration Judges must rely on State Department reports to assess the quality of governance of a foreign state, and, as such, it is unlikely that any given judge will consider Mexico as being anything other than a democratic nation that attempts to maintain the rule of law and

fulfil its sovereign responsibilities. Given the relatively recent democratization of Mexico, I asked the judge how “democratic countries” are determined since it could be claimed that Iraq and Afghanistan are presently democratic countries. The judge explained that, regarding Iraq and Afghanistan, the State Department seems to recognize shortcomings in these democracies, since they don’t observe the same due process that is expected in the United States.

Despite the apolitical nature of Immigration Courts, their use of State Department reports to inform their decisions betrays indirect political bias underwritten by the foreign policy interests of the U.S. government. For example, the U.S. State Department reports a high standard of due process in Mexico’s judicial system, an assertion which has been challenged by a few high-profile trials. One such trial involved Israel Arzate Meléndez, a man who was falsely accused in the Villas de Salvárcar case, in which a group of young Juarenses with no gang or drug affiliation whatsoever were gunned down by masked men on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010. Arzate was severely beaten by his arresting officers and presumed guilty until proven innocent. Though Arzate was eventually exonerated, his case is one of many examples of due process being ignored in Mexico’s judicial system.

Despite the shortcomings of the State Department reports, it would be impractical to require judges to make independent assessments of every asylum seeker’s country of origin. And it would be difficult for respondents to afford expert witnesses, who would have to be hired at their expense. Therefore, within the courts, the State Department reports become a standard of information. Some judges do make interpretations, defining individuals as members of a social group, when they are threatened by criminal actors, so that the individuals may qualify for asylum, but the judges’ ability to do so is governed by whatever precedent has been established in their respective Circuit courts.

In observing the arguments set forth in court, a juxtaposition between how Mexico is painted rhetorically and how it is treated politically emerges. Rhetorically, Mexico is painted as a place where pernicious drug trafficking organizations are, at best, beyond the control of the government or, at worst, in cahoots with the government; moreover, over the past ten years or more, they have been responsible for the deaths of thousands upon thousands of individuals. However, politically, America’s relationship with Mexico is still important for trade. The U.S. Department of State (2015) “warns U.S. citizens about the risk of traveling to certain places in Mexico due to threats to



safety and security posed by organized criminal groups in the country,” noting that “U.S. citizens have been the victims of violent crimes, such as kidnapping, carjacking, and robbery by organized criminal groups in various Mexican states.” Nevertheless, the U.S. government, evidently, still maintains that its Mexican counterpart behaves within the rule of law and upholds its responsibilities, such as capturing the culprits behind the drug violence, prosecuting them effectively, and keeping them under lock and key.

## FOUR: TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

### *GET SHORTY*

The face of Joaquín Archivaldo “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera (b. 1954), perhaps the most storied drug lord since Pablo Escobar, stared bleakly at me through the windows of the newspaper stands as I walked to Juárez one day. He had been arrested in a joint operation of U.S. and Mexican forces on Saturday, February 22nd, 2014. Famous for his short stature and chronicled in song and folklore, Guzmán was the moral leader of the Sinaloa Federation, deemed by many to be the most powerful and one of the most violent of the drug trafficking organizations operating in the western hemisphere.

The timing of Guzmán’s capture was conspicuous. President Barak Obama had gone to Toluca, Mexico, to meet with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in a summit of North American leaders. Also, earlier in the week, it was announced that the February 24<sup>th</sup> International issue of *Time* would run a story deeming Peña Nieto as the “Savior of Mexico,” specifically claiming that Peña Nieto’s reforms had “changed the narrative in his narco-stained nation” (Crowley 2014). The cover was widely spoofed by Mexicans who, on social media, indicated that Peña Nieto had nothing to do with any advances in the narcowar (Moreno 2014). According to them, the efforts of the *autodefensas*, the vigilante groups that had been contesting DTOs and their violence, deserved praise (Hernández 2015).

The news of Guzmán’s capture gave rise to a lot of questions of what might happen now that he had been captured. In the U.S., armchair pundits suggested that violence would increase while the flow of heroin and cocaine into the U.S. would decrease. Yet, those of us who had been keeping a close eye on the DTOs were quick to note that the capture needed to be kept in perspective: El Chapo had not been the operational leader of the Sinaloa Cartel for some years; that role belonged to Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada García (b. 1948) (Reuters 2016, Gagne 2015). The fall of Guzmán thus was unlikely to trigger the territorial wars and infighting that other big snags have historically caused. Despite El Chapo’s capture, leadership of the Sinaloa Cartel would remain stable. So, what seemed to be likely at the time, and indeed what happened, was a small decrease in the perception of insecurity in Mexico and an increase in the popularity of Peña Nieto but little else in terms of empirically observable change that could be rightfully attributed to Guzmán’s arrest.

Still, newspapers on both sides of the border floated many questions. What would happen to El Chapo legally speaking? Would he be tried in Mexico? Would the U.S. demand that he be extradited? Would Mexico even allow Guzmán's extradition? Would there be infighting or power grabs despite El Mayo's leadership in the Sinaloa Cartel? Would the accusations that the governments of the U.S. and Mexico were propping up the Sinaloa Cartel ever fade? Or, would the groans of graft and corruption only increase? Would there be any unforeseen political effects with regards to this capture? Or would life go on, and would the political bump that *El Presidente* EPN<sup>24</sup> would invariably receive subside as it did for his American counterpart following the killing of Osama bin Laden? Oh, and would Guzmán escape again?

After the initial buzz of Guzmán's arrest washed out of the news cycle, only the last question was definitively answered: El Chapo escaped from prison on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, in dramatic fashion, disappearing through a hole in his prison shower that was connected to a mile-long tunnel that proved to be his ticket back to freedom (Ahmed and Archibold 2015). With Guzmán on the lam, the illicit business associated with him seemed to continue as usual. Guzmán remained free until January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, when he was arrested near his Sinaloa base. Likewise, with Guzmán again locked up, business continued as usual for both the drug trade and the media narrative, supplying demand for drugs and sensational reports about the Sinaloa Cartel's prowess, respectively.

#### *PROTECTION AFFORDS OPPORTUNITY*

As fabled as he is, El Chapo is not the first of his kind; he is part of a long line of drug barons, including the original *Jefe de Jefes*, Arturo Beltrán Leyva (1961 – 2009), who came before him. It is possible that Guzmán contributed to the increase in violence that came to characterize the drug trade in the 2000s (Shirk, Wood, and Olson 2014), by being a player who willingly engaged in that game and perhaps helped escalate the magnitude of violence, but "business as usual" was established long before Guzmán became a top-level player. However, to understand what "business as usual" is in the contemporary context and how it evolved, we must go back nearly a century, to the years just after the Mexican Revolution, the war that was fought, in part, within view of the Sunset Heights neighbourhood in which I stayed.

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<sup>24</sup> Enrique Peña Nieto

The Mexican Revolution led to the promulgation of the country's present Constitution. Written in 1917, it is a revision of the 1857 Constitution, which attempted to establish a democratic state. It offers liberal democratic rights that were not afforded under the regime of Porfirio Díaz, the military dictator who governed Mexico for 30 of the 34 years (1876 – 1910) preceding the Mexican Revolution (Henderson 2000, Ramos 1967, Branch and Rowe 1917). While the Mexican Revolution was ushered in with a stated desire for democratic elections, any true sense of democracy in Mexico proved to be elusive for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bailey 1978). From 1929, when the party that became known as the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) won its first presidential election until the beginning of regime liberalization in the 1980s, Mexico was under the PRI's control. During this period, which came to be known as the *Príismo*, the PRI established and maintained itself as the largest electoral force in the country (Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001).

Whereas other autocratic regimes in Latin America justified their illiberal actions by modifying their legal codes without the consent of their citizens or by relying on coercion tactics, the PRI, in contrast, sought to maintain a relatively high degree of popular legitimacy by adapting policies that created the appearance that the PRI was responding to the demands of Mexico's citizens and operating in their best interests (Magaloni 2005). The PRI government conveyed the image that the government was providing economic and physical security to its citizens (Celaya Pacheco 2009), thereby fulfilling critical responsibilities as the "administrative staff<sup>25</sup>" of the state whose responsibilities are to secure the provision of such security (Weber 1947). It was a strategy that emulated a tried and true blueprint to establish legitimacy (for a discussion of establishing legitimacy, see: Reus-Smit 2007). In addition, the PRI sought to solidify its political staying power by consolidating control. It did so by asserting a monopoly over the protection market.

Protection is the chief parameter that delimits the boundaries of one's behaviour. Many may think of protection rackets in terms of predatory regulation (Frye and Zhuravskaya 2000), such as a mob lackey shaking down a store owner for an

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<sup>25</sup> By "government," I adopt Max Weber's (1947) view that it is the "administrative staff" of a state that engages in political activity on the state's behalf, such as exercising its authority and affecting control.

envelope full of cash in exchange for the promise not to burn down the property and to prevent others from burning it down. However, protection rackets are simply mechanisms which provide protection to a given array of actors. They exist in several licit settings, from international politics to domestic markets to individual, familial, and group activities (Tilly 1985, Sheptycki 2003, Ehrlich and Becker 1972, Black 1983, Varese 2006). In these situations, protection allows a space for an actor to behave within the limits that protection affords it without being impeded by those who may be opposed to, or wish to otherwise control, that actor's operation. Accordingly, illicit manifestations of protection may undermine licit arrangements, such as imposing the need to purchase protection on an unwilling customer in order to conduct business as normal, contesting the norms that the state otherwise imposes as a condition for its provision of protection, or allowing criminal actors the space to engage in unlawful behaviour (Varese 2006).

In theory, the state is supposed to protect licit members from such abuses from actors outside and within its borders, while targeting criminal impositions of protection. Such is the basis of the protection that underpins the interstate system that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia whereby, in principle, "states are subject to no external earthly authority" (Ruggie 2002, 47). While this principle has been violated on occasion when a more powerful state, or group of states, exerts its will on another, it is a principle which shows us that states are, for the most part, "sovereign within their own territory" (Ruggie 2002, 47). In other words, in successfully asserting protection, actors – in the case of states, their governments – can behave in whatever manner they believe serves their best interest so long as they can continue to maintain and sustain their protection from being impinged upon by others. Thus, protection affords the ability to pursue opportunity.

Identifying protection as a function of the state is not my observation; Charles Tilly makes the association and takes it further by saying that "[i]f protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making – quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy – qualify as our largest examples of organized crime" (1985, 169). Tilly's analogy illustrates that even without being subjected to enforceable law, as is generally the case with states, the provision of protection allows for a state to engage in the behaviour it wishes to. Therefore, I might offer a slight correction to Tilly's claim: protection rackets do not represent organized crime at its *smoothest*, but at its most *fundamental*. Without

adequate protection from the state and/or competitors, organized criminal enterprise cannot easily develop and expand its business.

### *THE PROTECTION MARKET IN MEXICO*

The protection offered by the PRI was both, to use Tilly's (1985) description of the concept, "comforting and ominous." It was comforting in that, for the majority of the Priísmo, Mexico enjoyed a relatively high level of economic stability and national security (Magaloni 2005, Peeler 2009). It was ominous in that over that same period the PRI established a means of hegemonic, vertical control by integrating nearly everything including businesses, unions, and criminal enterprise into a corporatist patronage structure which it deftly administered (O'Neil 2009, Peeler 2009, Snyder and Martínez 2009). Among those criminal enterprises was, of course, illicit trade.

"Juárez has always been a city, throughout history, that has had organized criminal activities [revolving around smuggling], and a lot of its economy has depended on them," Carolina, a long-time Juárez journalist, explained. "We're talking about decades where [smuggling] was concentrated through here. Even Al Capone trafficked his liquor through here. After that, Juárez remained, due to our geographical position, located between bonanza and disgrace, a transit point for everything."

While no laws existed that allowed DTOs to operate legally, a set of *de facto* rules established by the PRI government oversaw the number of DTOs in existence; the *plazas* (territories with logistical importance, such as being in proximity to a border, being a port, or, less commonly, having a significant local drug market) that each controlled; and the volume and kind of product – illicit drugs – trafficked (Lupsha 1991). These rules established what DTO behaviour would be tolerated, particularly as it related to other DTOs and the public (Velasco 2005). The PRI's effective monopoly in providing protection allowed it to augment its constitutionally conferred authority – the ability to make *de jure* or *de facto* rules – and to institutionalize control – the ability to enforce those rules, thus ensuring DTOs would largely obey the PRI's rules (Snyder and Martínez 2009, Patenostro 1995, Thomson 1995). Accordingly, these rules meant that DTOs were delimited to operate in specific territories which forced them to concentrate on the "transactional" aspect of the drug trade rather its "territorial" aspect, given that territory was not contestable for the time being (Jones 2016, Reuter 2009).

Initially, PRI-defined and guaranteed protection for criminal actors benefited both the government and DTOs. On one hand, the PRI-governed protection provided DTOs with uncontested *plazas* by minimizing threats and limiting disputes over

territory, market share, and resources among competitors, including other DTOs and law enforcement. Such an arrangement helped DTOs to counter possible lost revenue due to the inability to freely compete in the drug market. On the other hand, the PRI used the knowledge it gained through its provision of protection to undertake selective arrests which not only reinforced the illusion that the government was providing security within the confines of law, but also led to increased “credit, praise, and promotions,” allowing the PRI to underscore its authority and consolidate its control (Lupsha 1991, 47, Snyder and Martínez 2009).

Through its monopoly of the protection market, supported by its military superiority relative to the DTOs of the era, the PRI could easily constrain any criminal organization that operated within its territory, thus monopolizing the protection market and guaranteeing that obedience to the *de facto* rules established through the protection scheme would be observed. DTOs which engaged in acts, violent or otherwise, deemed not to be in the government’s interest were easily squelched (Grayson 2010, Snyder and Martínez 2009). By co-opting DTOs and condoning their illegal activities during the Priísmo, the PRI discarded any semblance of democratic legitimacy despite keeping up with the charade of “democratic” elections. Heavy-handed control tactics buttressed the government’s authority and allowed the PRI to maintain the popular support necessary to remain in power and attend to the state’s affairs. DTOs paid corrupt politicians in order to remain in good political graces, keeping their illicit business interests free from catastrophic government interference. In essence, the PRI exercised its authority, allowing relationships underwritten by corruption between several of the state’s many law enforcement bodies and DTOs to flourish.

Monica, an El Paso immigration attorney whose clients had fled Mexico due to the violence and lack of effective government protection, alluded to this historical phenomenon and what she identified as its recent resurgence: “There has always been [...] a gentleman’s agreement between the government and the cartels. ‘Okay, we’ll let you do your thing, just don’t go killing people.’ And so you have [President Calderón who] waged this war on the cartels, and I feel like, now, the reason things are kind of calming down is, one, because they have killed so many people, [and] two, because with [President Peña Nieto] it kind of feels like they are back to their gentleman’s agreement. [...] And that is kind of the sense, I think, for a lot of people, Mexicans and non-Mexicans, alike: there just isn’t a sense of trust in the government.”

During the 1980s, as regime liberalization began, the PRI dominance and the long-existing “gentleman’s agreement” finally started to deteriorate. Political pressure exerted externally from the United States and internally from opposition parties essentially called the PRI’s bluff that Mexico was a liberal-democracy. This pressure forced democratic legitimacy to be reintroduced as a rightful component of Mexican sovereignty, defined as how a government organizes and effectively exercises its public authority (Krasner 1999). In effect, given that Mexico claimed to be a liberal democracy, the PRI’s critics called for a transition towards a liberal democratic governance model. The need for the government to be legitimated via a more democratic process changed the parameters that underpinned the PRI’s operations, barring – or at least reducing – the *de jure* illegitimate tactics the PRI had long employed.

#### *THE LIBERALIZATION OF POLITICS AND THE PROTECTION MARKET*

Mexico’s attempted transition to a modern liberal democracy was not seamless. To use the words of political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2013), though a “well-governed” authoritarian regime, Mexico became a “mal-administered” democracy during its regime transition. It remains questionable whether the present Mexican government has the capacity to govern effectively, given that large swaths of the population lack confidence in the government’s ability to provide security in the presence of ongoing corruption, massive inequality, and severe violent episodes throughout the country, making governance less effective as compared to what it was during the *Priísmo* (Krozer and Moreno-Brid 2014, Chabat 2002).

Regime liberalization and, along with it, the liberalization of Mexico’s illicit markets began in the early 1980s. The 1982 elections eroded the PRI’s political monopoly, resulting in its initial loss of hegemonic control. With the locus of control fragmented, political competition undermined the previous PRI-sponsored protection rackets and impaired the PRI’s centralized control, and this phenomenon only grew as the main opposition party, the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), won gubernatorial victories in Baja California in 1989 and Chihuahua in 1992 (Klesner 1998). With the PAN in control at the state level, the protection racket monopoly was broken, and the DTOs of the *Priísmo* became obsolete. DTOs needed to deal with the newly competitive protection market; they needed to overhaul their business model. As Snyder and Martínez (2009, 74) indicate, “[t]he resulting heterogeneous political landscape increased the number of potential protectors available to traffickers and undercut the



coordination that the shared allegiances of public officials to a single party had previously made possible.”

Just as protection is the foundation that gives states the ability to operate without having their actions successfully contested in order to expand an empire, a protection racket is the foundation upon which illegal entrepreneurs must build in order to develop and expand their enterprises, should they want to maximize control over their own affairs (Gambetta 1993, Reuter 1983). For that reason, when the opportunity to compete against the state in the protection market arose in Mexico, as the PRI’s monopoly weakened with regime liberalization, crime bosses, such as Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (b. 1946), Rafael Caro Quintero (b. 1952), and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo (b. 1930), understood it to be an opportunity to rise to undreamt of levels of attainment. They could now run their business differently and engage in business practices that had been previously limited and/or prohibited by the PRI.

In short, with regime liberalization, the vertical control the PRI once enjoyed began to deteriorate, and the criminal actors who had long existed under PRI rule quickly and efficiently used the organizational wellbeing, market share, connections, and operational knowhow gained over the restricted market years to challenge the government in the protection market. The first such organization to take advantage of the liberalization of the underworld was the Guadalajara Cartel which was founded by Gallardo, Caro Quintero, and Fonseca after the 1982 elections (Hernández 2012). It was a DTO which emulated Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel, making it the first of a new generation of Mexican DTOs to emerge during that era. In effect, these new DTOs created a parallel structure that sought to undermine, but not topple, the government by competing with its authority and control in their *plazas* of operation (Jones 2016), thus making it easier for DTOs to operate by circumventing or undermining efforts of the government to affect control via the provision of protection (Shortland and Varese 2015), or in market terms, to regulate their business (Astorga 2005, Grayson and Logan 2012).

These DTO undertakings belong on a continuum of power seeking along with “[b]anditry, piracy, gangland rivalry, policing, and war making” (Tilly 1985, 170). It is important to note that these organizations are not interested in supplanting governance, the “government’s ability to make and enforce rules [laws], and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not” (Fukuyama 2013, 3, emphasis mine). In other words, there is little evidence to suggest that territorial

DTOs and other criminal actors have sought to assume the responsibilities of governing or supplant the state's government.

Instead, such criminal actors seek to successfully compete with the government in the protection market, whereby "success" is defined by effectively undermining the government's authority and legitimacy to operate and establish laws and norms, through corruption and bribery, and by contesting the government's ability to affect control, that is enforcing its laws, either by compromising enforcement services or intimidating the public from calling the enforcement services (Kan 2012, Manwaring 2007, Jones 2016). Successful criminal contestation of the state became evident in the earliest stages of Mexico's democratic transition; Mexico quickly found itself unable to realize effective control vis-à-vis the DTOs. Simultaneously, the DTOs evolved into efficient, illicit enterprises that sought to maximize profits and dominate the wholesale drug market without encumbrance.

Nonetheless, even as the opportunity to quickly grow presented itself, the cautious "old-school" bosses favoured corruption instead of violence to facilitate business, an arrangement which has become normalized in Mexican political society (Sabet 2012, Nagle 2010, Freeman 2006, Lupsha 1991, Campbell 2009). After all, the protection rackets that they were developing were nascent and untested; they were unsure whether they were competitive products. Moreover, the DTOs were likely unsure whether the amount of control they had over their *plazas*, that is the strength of their protection rackets, was sufficient to contest the state outright. The best way to corrupt a government entity was to infiltrate its law enforcement institutions as a double agent, simultaneously performing the roles of both cop and criminal. One such agent was Rafael Aguilar Guajardo (1942 – 1993).

### *BUSINESS IN THE OLD DAYS*

Since the 1970s, Rafael Aguilar had been a member of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS), the Mexican federal secret police responsible for organizing and administering the DTOs' *plazas*, which in those days were almost entirely territories that held value due to their logistical advantages, under the PRI (Lupsha 1991). Once the DFS was disbanded in the wake of the 1985 murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camerena (1947 – 1985), Aguilar used his knowhow and connections to gain control of the Juárez *plaza*, valuable for being home to one of the largest inland ports in the United States, and which he had overseen as a regional commander for the DFS (Poppa 2010). No longer a cop, he simply became a drug trafficker, a fulltime *narco*.

“Aguilar was the one who maintained the peace between the cartels in the area. [... Then, when he no longer held his law enforcement position, he] paid El Greñas<sup>26</sup> for the right to run the *plaza*,” Jacob, a former Aguilar employee, explained to me. “El Greñas was the one who managed the *plaza* for the Juárez Cartel.”

Paying El Greñas to run the *plaza* was an investment that would earn Aguilar millions of dollars. They were dollars that Jacob, a man who had been recruited into the criminal underworld due to his skills in finance, had to launder. It was a world that Jacob had gotten to know as his cocaine habit grew. He was hired to handle payments for Hotel Silvas in Juárez. The hotel, which has long since burned down, was an establishment owned by Aguilar that served as front to launder some of his many proceeds from crime.

“The first time [I was asked to launder money], I took about 180 thousand [U.S.] dollars to a *casa de cambio*<sup>27</sup> that doesn’t exist anymore and they gave me checks. And it was up to me to do the bank transfers to pay the hotel’s bills and employees,” Jacob recounted. “Eventually, they sent me about a million dollars to deal with. I was tempted to steal it, but where was I going to go where the boss wasn’t going to find me? I drove my pickup to the hotel and I knew that there was always somebody behind me. So, they continued to give me larger and larger quantities. First, 180 thousand, then 200 thousand, until it was a million dollars. From then on, it was only millions of dollars.”

Jacob reminisced about how different – namely less violent and outwardly gruesome – the drug trade was twenty-five years ago, when he was involved: “Everyone knew there was a lot going on in Juárez because there were those [in the government] who let it happen. There were lots of dive bars and cheap hotels that were open 24 hours a day and full of government employees, U.S. military guys. There was a lot of cash flow. [The *narcos*] set up businesses and they were successful. It was all built on the power that the [*narcos*] had, and it was why they kept a low profile.”

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<sup>26</sup> Gilberto “El Greñas” Ontiveros Lucero (b. 1962?) earned his nickname for his dishevelled hair. Like Rafael Caro Quintero, another well-known Juárez-based drug kingpin, and late Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar, El Greñas was known for his opulent yet philanthropic spending. In 1986, he was arrested and convicted for the kidnapping and torture of Al Gutiérrez, who worked for the now defunct El Paso newspaper, the *Harold-Post* (Comas 1986).

<sup>27</sup> A *casa de cambio* is a money exchanger. They are common in Mexican border towns where there is a lot of demand to exchange dollars for pesos and vice versa.

The men involved in the drug trade as well as the journalists who covered it recalled a time long gone: “In those days, Juárez was full of all kinds of people: *gabachos*<sup>28</sup>, Italians, Puerto Ricans, etcetera. The border was beautiful. It was rare that, in a bar, somebody would kill someone with a gun,” said Jaime, a former assassin, comparing the ‘80s and ‘90s to the violence and bloodshed of the late 2000s and 2010s.

Gattopardo, who went on to become a Sureño prison gang member in southern California, remembered the gangs of his youth, as being organized along neighbourhood lines and not interested in expanding: “We just wanted to be in the neighbourhood, selling weed on the corner, drinking some beers. If some kids from another neighbourhood came, we’d fight them just to keep the neighbourhood safe.”

When there was violence, those involved in the drug trade in the ‘80s and ‘90s viewed it as targeted. “I used to always say that if you aren’t in debt, you don’t have anything to worry about,” explained Lucas, a former Juárez gang member, implying that people who failed to pay in a timely manner would be the most likely targets of violence. But the role of the *narcos* in terms of controlling day-to-day life was undeniable: “All of the violence that was erupting was the cartels; the victims weren’t average people. The innocents killed were people who had seen or heard something,” Lucas continued. “I always managed to never see, never hear, and never speak.” It was all part of a code that the *narcos* usually abided by, a set of rules which were designed to keep unwanted attention away.

“There weren’t executions in the street,” Jacob explained. “If there were people who tried to sell drugs within the *plaza*, [the *narcos*] picked them up and told them that if they wanted to sell, there wouldn’t be a problem so long as they paid *cuota*<sup>29</sup>. [The *narcos*] would take their drugs away and let them go. They would give [non-paying street vendors] one other warning. Then, the third time, they would kidnap them and kill them outside of Juárez. There was a code that said you couldn’t kill people in front of children or women. It wasn’t good to draw unwanted attention; the *narcos* kept a low profile.”

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<sup>28</sup> White Americans.

<sup>29</sup> A tax to be paid to the individuals who controlled the territory in order to conduct illicit business within it.

Carolina, a journalist who had been working the narco beat for more than twenty years, corroborated Jacob's account. She recalled that in the 80s and 90s, "the violence wasn't perceptible because the *narcos'* way of settling their debts was to disappear people, who were never heard from again."

### *A MARKET IN TRANSITION*

Jacob, Jaime, Gattopardo, and Lucas lived and worked in the drug trade, and Carolina reported on it during a time of transition that spanned over fifteen years from the mid-1980s until the late 1990s. They saw changes in the drug trade which eventually gave rise to the circumstances that would foment the violence for which Juárez would become famous. At first, cash, not violence, remained the principal building block of the drug trade. But, over time, violent conflict became more commonplace (H. Campbell 2011).

In 1993, Jacob's boss, Rafael Aguilar, was murdered, shot to death as he vacationed in Cancún. Aguilar's killing happened days after U.S. intelligence intercepted a communication in which Aguilar had complained to his protectors, likely Mexican law enforcement, about the amount of money he was being forced to pay (Poppa 2010). Aguilar's murder happened in broad daylight, serving as a signal that Amado Carrillo Fuentes (1956 – 1997), Aguilar's former business partner, had arrived (Ravelo 2012). In some respects, Aguilar's assassination departed from the code to leave those not involved unharmed: a tourist from Denver was caught in the gunfire (Miller 1993). It was emblematic of the emerging violence of the time: infighting began to escalate into violent disputes as a number of emerging drug lords attempted to take over their rivals' *plazas* (Hernández 2012, Ravelo 2012).

Amado Carrillo, known as the "*El Señor de los Cielos*" – The Lord of the Skies – expanded business more than anyone before him by using a fleet of airplanes to traffic drugs in increasingly large quantities (Hernández 2012). Carrillo also used targeted violence to protect against losses and treachery, with hundreds of targets being exterminated. However, he primarily relied on extensive payoffs to grow his business; he had an estimated "payoff budget between \$500 million and \$800 million a year flowing to his protectors in government" (Poppa 2010, 306).

Jaime, a man who had worked as a *gatillero* – a triggerman – for the Carrillo Fuentes Organization echoed this account. Jaime's job was to eliminate problems within the organization and to ensure that he did not create new ones.

“Today, *‘gatilleros’* are known as *‘sicarios,’* the difference only being the word used to describe them,” Jaime explained. But the job was done differently in the past; violence was controlled. Jaime said there used to be “respect” for violence: “A *narco*, for example, would have people killed, but he would always say, ‘be careful with the children; don’t kill anybody in front of the children. Wait until children are gone to kill people.’”

Several of the journalists I interviewed corroborated Jaime’s view on violence. These journalists, who had covered drug-trade-related violence in Juárez over the past two decades, noted that there used to be a time when children were not harmed and not allowed to engage in harmful activities, such as using heroin or guns. In addition to children not being allowed to engage in harmful activities, there was no need to employ children to be soldiers because, unlike the 2010s when gangs and DTOs recruited children to staff the bodies needed in the proxy war, violence was not rampant.

According to Jaime, in the past, the *narcos* used their wealth to their advantage: “The *narcos* had power because they had lots of money. In those days, it was because they came from wealthy families or got rich by trafficking drugs. They could buy chiefs of police, prison guards, customs agents. [...] There were prisoners who could leave [the penitentiary], but had to return by a certain date and had to make sure they didn’t get into trouble or get media attention.”

In the old days, money greased the wheels that kept illicit enterprises turning in Mexico. But the continued pressure from the U.S. government with its ongoing war on drugs forced Mexican law enforcement operations to target specific DTOs more heavily than others in an effort to create the perception that they were sincerely trying to stop drug trafficking. This move, coupled with the conflicts within and between DTOs, resulted in the death or incarceration of “old-school” DTO bosses, those who preferred negotiation as opposed to violence, throughout the 1990s (Castaneda 2010). Despite these operations, the complicity between law enforcement and drug traffickers continued, albeit with different people acting out the roles (Hernández 2012, Campbell 2009).

The resulting cultural sea change saw a rising tide of new bosses, often former *sicarios*, who favoured confrontation and violence over the diplomatic patronage system of old (Grayson 2009, Astorga 2005). These new bosses included Vicente “El Viceroy” Carrillo Fuentes (b. 1962), who joined his brother Amado in running the Juárez Cartel, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén (b. 1967) who headed the Gulf Cartel, and, of course,

Joaquín Guzmán Loera, who eventually came to be the head of the infamous Sinaloa Federation. The conflicts that occurred among these emerging leaders led to the testing of their protection rackets, which had been developing as the old-school bosses continued to compromise government and law enforcement officials, a practice which still seems to be a part of Mexico's political landscape (Campbell 2009). Although government actors were enjoying fat wallets, they no longer possessed the power they once held over the *narcos*. They were unable to recoup the monopoly or develop dominance in the protection market. Ultimately, the government could no longer hold the drug trafficking organizations in check; the people who lived in areas where the drug trade was a significant part of daily life would now be subjected to forced private protection (van Duyne and Levi 2005).

### *SIGNALLING A CHANGE*

The new days of the drug trade were on the horizon. In Juárez, this era was marked with Amado Carrillo's 1997 death on a Mexico City operating table: "After Amado Carrillo was already dead, the first mass killing happened in a restaurant called Maxi. Seven people – all innocent – died that day in an attack directed against people who were associated with Amado Carrillo," Carolina recalled. "From then on, other violent acts happened. The next one was in a bar called Gerónimo where the director of the jail and the boss of the establishment were both killed. [...] These acts showed a new behaviour that had to do more than anything with the new cartel leadership, who began to behave more aggressively, disappearing a whole host of people, including police commanders, businessmen, and people, who in some way, had crossed the *narcos*."

Money alone was no longer sufficient for DTOs to expand their operations. To achieve the biggest potential profits, the time had come to employ violence on a larger and expanded scale. DTOs clearly felt that their protection rackets were strong enough to guarantee their survival. They had developed effective violent self-help mechanisms which provided for "the handling of a grievance with aggression," which could allow a criminal entrepreneur, such as one who is coordinating an organized conspiracy or a terrorist activity, the means necessary to protect their illicit activity (Black 2004, 15). To further dominate the emerging protection market of the 1990s, the new drug bosses of the era continued to move beyond the corruption of law enforcement to the development of armed branches which would buttress their emerging protection rackets (Kan 2012). Osiel Cardenas, the head of the Gulf Cartel, was the first to

introduce such a group. In 1996, he recruited soldiers from the *Grupos Aeromóviles de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFE) and formed what was to become known as the Zetas (Hernández 2012, Ravelo 2012). The Zetas embraced and revolutionized the role of protectors, bringing a high level of violence to their trade. This violence was critical in eroding the government's ability to affect control in the Gulf Cartel's *plaza*.

To use Diego Gambetta's (2009) framework, the violence served as a signal to competing DTOs, the state, and the general public. The violence showed competitors that there would be consequences for intruding onto someone's *plaza*. It also showed competitors that their own *plazas* would not be safe should they be unable to protect them. Accordingly, competing DTOs saw little choice but to emulate the Zetas' successful use of violence and began to establish their own armed groups, such as the Juárez Cartel's creation of *La Línea*, which included a motley crew of local and federal police as well as members of the Mexican army (Kan 2012, Ravelo 2012, Hernández 2012, Grayson and Logan 2012).

The government was effectively put on notice, as violence indicated that the previous arrangements of corruption would now be insufficient; moreover, corruption would no longer be optional. The failure to turn a blind eye could result in the death of an official, a fact encapsulated in the slogan of "*plata o plomo*," giving officials the damning option of accepting a bribe or taking a bullet to the head. With the protection market no longer under government control, the Mexican government could no longer unilaterally regulate the violence or the drug trade.

The deaths of journalists and average citizens further signalled this change. Under the threat of retribution, journalists came to fear covering illicit activity and organizations. The 2008 still-unsolved killing of Armando Rodríguez Carreón (1968? – 2008), a journalist for the Juárez broadsheet, *El Diario*, rattled many of his peers and contributed to the insecurity that plagues those who cover the drug beat. Likewise, members of the public came to fear reporting illicit activity to law enforcement, since the public now believed that law enforcement were either inept or in cahoots with DTOs. The public reacted to these "signal crimes" with forced silence (Innes 2003, 2014), in part because the state was unable to respond to the public's demand for improved public safety. In short, DTOs normalized silence in the wake of crime in Mexican society.

Marco, a journalist who once covered the narco beat, noted that, "Like all of the citizens, Juárez-based journalists feel the *inseguridad* in their bones."



*Inseguridad* roughly translates to insecurity, but it is a multifaceted concept (México Evalúa 2010, 7). It involves not only the feeling that one is unsafe but also the conviction that the government is failing to protect its citizens from the violent actors of the criminal underworld. It is the perception that the government is incompetent. It is the feeling that government is colluding with the very criminals from whom they are meant to be protecting the public, which gives criminals impunity from the law. It is the government's failure or unwillingness to pursue meaningful outcomes within the justice system and the fear that one will become a victim to crime (Witte 2016). *Inseguridad* is how approximately seventy per cent of Mexicans describe the security status of their city (INEGI 2015a); while nearly sixty per cent of all Mexicans say it is their principal worry (INEGI 2015b).

One former Juárez journalist, Elena, who covered the drug trade extensively in her twenty-plus year career, identified two important elements that allow the drug trade to exist as it did then and does now in its contemporary form: "One [element] is impunity and the other is that the cartels have a social base. Impunity has to do with the poor procurement of justice. The social base is characterized by certain illegal activities that have permeated into society and have become normalized."

Another journalist, Pedro, furthered Elena's point by noting that the major criminal players were well known: "I think that the majority of journalists know who [the bosses of the DTOs in Juárez and the dirty politicians] are. But, obviously you can't say their names, much less publish them. The sins of politicians are untouchable [... because if you were to say something] people in government have many ways they can put pressure on you. They go over your taxes, over every little thing that you are accountable for and they find something, right?"

The historic and present inability of the press or the public to consistently and transparently report on wrongs and see appropriate responses means that the line between government actors and the criminals was, and for many still is, blurred. The inability to criticize officials without repercussions appears to be a holdover from the opacity instituted by the PRI during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dresser 1998). For criminal entrepreneurs in the protection market, this development is optimal: it reduces the control and authority of the government while buttressing DTOs' violent, self-help mechanisms that allow DTOs to act according to their interests (Black 1983). In short, DTOs affected society by changing how society (generally) responds to criminal acts. That change is the reason why so many of the respondents in immigration court refused

to report their assaults to Mexican authorities. It also explains why those respondents viewed moving within Mexico as dangerous and therefore impossible, since a government they do not and cannot trust is present throughout the territory.

Yet, almost every time I walked from El Paso to Juárez, photos of accused narcocriminals graced the front pages of the afternoon tabloids. Whenever someone of the narcoworld was arrested, a media circus ensued. One journalist took me along to see a “perp walk,” where the accused were paraded in front of journalists representing a half dozen or so media outlets. The suspects, sometimes bearing signs of having been battered, were standing behind a table on which were displayed the tools they had allegedly used to commit their crimes. Reporters barked questions at the accused, seemingly convinced of the suspects’ guilt. The suspects always confessed their guilt with short, clear sentences which they repeated until the questioning was over. There was no regard for due process; no right to stay silent; no attorney present. The accused whom I saw were small fry – a few of the many gang members now serving as minions for the *narcos*.



**Photo 6: A man accused of stealing cars and being involved in the drug trade by equipping the vehicles with hidden compartments is presented to the media with the tools with which he was caught.**

*THE NEW "BUSINESS AS USUAL"*

DTOs throughout the country, and their "armed branches," employed violent tactics in an effort to establish dominance over their smuggling routes. The Zetas, building upon the efficacy of the violent tactics they pioneered, distanced themselves from the Gulf Cartel and over the course of a few years established themselves as their own, separate, full-fledged DTO, which eventually successfully competed for a significant slice of the wholesale drug marketplace, especially in eastern Mexico (Jones 2016). A war between the Zetas and their former masters started in 2010. Eager to make a name for themselves and to assert control over the Gulf Cartel's areas of operation, the Zetas used terrorist-inspired tactics, such as beheadings, kidnapping, and bombings, to gain control over rivals and to intimidate local society, media, and law enforcement (Grayson and Logan 2012).

However, the Zetas' betrayal of their relationship with the Gulf Cartel triggered another change in organizational strategy. The Gulf Cartel had failed to control its anointed protection providers and the Mexican state and, consequently, was harmed by both of them (Jones 2016). With the Zetas exacting high casualties, returning to the government for protection was no longer an option for the Gulf Cartel; the Calderón administration had a public policy designed to hit narcotics traffickers hard. Accordingly, for most drug trafficking organizations protection against outside threats, including the state and, especially, their competitors, remained a problem, forcing drug traffickers to rethink how they were going to establish protection. The solution was to turn to the gangs that had developed throughout the 1990s, following the deportation of prison gang members from the U.S. back to Mexico.

Special Agent Diana Apodaca, then the public information officer for the El Paso DEA office, confirmed this phenomenon in Juárez, stating that: "Since the mid-2000s, the Juárez Cartel has used members of the Barrio Azteca (BA) gang to oversee its retail-level drug sales in Ciudad Juárez and to assist in fighting rival cartel members. BA members subsequently expanded their role to include enforcement, providing additional personnel and firepower against the Sinaloa Cartel and fighting a proxy war with the Sinaloa-aligned street gangs known as the *Artistas Asesinos* and the *Mexicles*."

While the "street gangs" Apodaca referred to have elements of the "traditional street gangs" of the Klein and Maxson (2010) typology in that "they are territorial in the sense that they identify strongly with their turf, 'hood, or barrio" and that they are "large, enduring, territorial gang[s]" (Klein and Maxson 2010, 176-177), they are not the same. Traditional street gangs that recruit and develop primarily youth members, which

are a majority of Mexican gangs, “do not have extensive transnational connections or connections to large Mexican DTOs” (Jones 2014, 8). Gangs which do have such connections, like Juárez’s *Artistas Asesinos* (AA) and Mexicles, differ from traditional street gangs in two significant ways.

First, they typically have a narrower age range. Members are recruited in jails and prisons, meaning that the members are likely to be older; consequently, the gangs do not include “pee-wee” ranks of preteen members. Moreover, the prison structure imposed on the members deters the creation of internal cliques.

Second, these gangs associate themselves with, and thus defer to, a DTO operating in their community, meaning that they do not claim their turf as “theirs alone,” in contrast to the Klein and Maxson (2010) characterization of traditional street gangs. The association with DTOs means that gangs like AA and the Mexicles commit relatively serious crimes.

Yet, these gangs are not “specialty gangs” which “narrowly [focus] on a few offenses” and which “tend to be small” (Klein and Maxson 2010, 178). In contrast, gangs like AA and the Mexicles tend to engage in a range of offences and be quite large. Accordingly, these gangs may oversee the retail operations of street gangs in the emerging retail drug market in Mexico (Durán Martínez 2015a). Nonetheless, their primary business interests – and means of making money – include facilitating mid-level wholesale operations and engaging in tasks which contest the control and authority of the state, which may act to impede operations, and establishing operational control in *plazas* where rival DTOs may attempt to operate (Manwaring 2011, 2007).

Notably, these gangs are not *themselves* DTOs as we have come to understand the term. While the Zetas developed the network necessary to replace the logistics previously undertaken by their employers, the Gulf Cartel, this is not the norm. Most DTOs appear to have structured the ways in which gangs provide protection and assume trafficking tasks in order to constrain them. Gangs typically engage in only intermediary trafficking activities and do not have access to suppliers in countries from which precursor products originate. This arrangement generally benefits both gangs and DTOs in that it provides an opportunity for gangs to generate income while using the skills they already possess and for the DTOs to defray risk to themselves by accepting a modest cost for having gangs assume riskier roles. To young men thirsting after money and a sense of power, it is an easy sell.

“[Y]ou don’t have to convince [gang members to take risks], because most of the soldiers [gang members] are already – they don’t care much because they’re already taking risks, themselves, just by being in a gang. So they don’t have worries,” Frank explained to me. He was a member of the 19<sup>th</sup> Street gang, a Juárez-based street gang with four generations of members. “So, to them they are actually fighting to get [cartel work, saying:] ‘Hey! Me, me, me. I want that money. I want to be [your guy].’ So, it’s not really convincing somebody. It’s more like finding the right person: someone that is not going to snitch on you, someone that is not going to be a rat, or that is going to just disappear with everything. That’s what you have to worry about – finding the right person, and making the right decisions – because otherwise your business is going to drop and then the drug cartel is going to come after your head.”

The new “business as usual” has three primary components. First, DTOs want to ensure that the government is unable to control them by interfering in their illegal business. In short, to speak in terms of political science, Mexican DTOs contest the sovereignty of the state: they undermine the government’s authority with corruption and confront the government’s control with violence (Andreas 1998). If we consider the DTOs’ actions in terms of market dynamics, the contestation of the government’s authority and control is a strategy which, in theory, should drive down costs by removing unwanted government regulation.

Second, the DTOs want to ensure that insecurity means that the public will not interfere. The public is too scared to report or react to criminal acts, the consequence being that most criminal acts, including murder, has little consequence in practice. The rise of the *autodefensas*, the vigilante groups that have developed to contest the dominance of DTOs in some places, seems to be an element of the public that is attempting to contest DTOs (Hernández 2015); however, their efficacy, and thus their impact on the protection market, is still questionable.

Third, the DTOs want to ensure that their protection providers do not turn against them, conducting something akin to a military coup. As an El Paso police sergeant named Charlie explained, DTOs seek to control their affiliated gangs “through the use of intimidation and violence, even up to death.” Plus, the use of gangs is a shrewd manoeuvre that allows DTOs to diversify their risks. With protection, DTOs can employ many underlings to do relatively small tasks; the success of each individual task is unimportant, so long as the aggregate pays out. For instance, narcotics could be trafficked by a process of “smurfing,” where several small loads are pushed through

over a period of time, with the assumption that some underlings will, in fact, be captured or even killed, while enough will get through to still make a profit.

Sometimes, the gang members involved in such activities are convinced that being a fall guy is simply part of their job description. One former Barrio Azteca member, Scoperto, told me that when he got caught for smuggling drugs, he knew that he was going to be caught on that day.

“Everyone would take their turn being a possible fall guy with a small load to distract customs from the larger shipment behind. The first time I went to prison, I knew that I was going to get busted. It was arranged and it didn’t matter to me at the time.”

For DTOs using this new business model, which involves co-opting gangs and swelling the numbers of operatives at their disposal, the value of any single actor decreases. It is a clever strategy, considering the success the Zetas had in deposing their masters. No contracted protection provider now has sufficient knowhow to run an entire drug trafficking operation on its own, thus rendering the protection providers more controllable. Nonetheless, as the number of protection providers has multiplied, competition in the protection marketplace has grown fiercer. Violence has supplanted money and corrupt officials in terms of importance. In short, the liberalization of the protection market resulted in a reconfiguration of the priorities and mentalities within the drug trade in Mexico.

DTO bosses were no longer content to earn only the money that corrupting officials alone offered. They knew that despite a larger human cost, more money could be made by developing a presence in the protection market either through their own organizations or by proxy through subcontracting armed groups, like the Zetas, or gangs, like Barrio Azteca. Protection allows DTOs to better compete in the wholesale drug trafficking market, and, by developing their own armed groups, DTOs could compete directly with one another, allowing for the possibility of exponential expansion of their criminal enterprises. Effectively, DTOs created their own best-case scenario. By controlling their own protection, DTOs have less need to respect the government. Therefore, so long as DTOs can maintain an effective protection racket which insulates them not only from state interference but also from being annihilated by their competitors, and so long as the demand for their products continues, they do not need to fear their collective demise; they just need to fear each other.

The apex of the violence in Mexico seems to have occurred between 2010 and 2011. Violence brings unwanted attention to the drug trade, so keeping heat from the *plazas* is a logistical concern for DTOs whose profits are, after all, driven by their ability to move their illicit commerce across the U.S.-Mexico border. By the numbers, violence is down from those blood-soaked years, but still comparatively high in many *plazas* throughout Mexico (Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015). A reduction in violence associated with the drug trade in a given site reflects a parallel trend regarding competition in the protection market. Less violence can be the result of four outcomes, all indicating a change in the degree of competition in the protection market.

First, a drop in violence may be caused by the unlikely event that the government has reasserted control over the market. Though it appears that government actors still heavily promote a culture of corruption (Transparency International 2014), there is little evidence to suggest that the government, even upon returning to PRI rule, has regained control over any sizeable proportion of the drug market in Mexico.

Second, the Mexican government could be implementing legal changes that are causing DTOs to make greater efforts to hide their previously visible violence, which, in turn, results in the perception that there is less violence (Durán Martínez 2015b, Witte 2016). Judging by the information I collected while in Juárez, this practice of hiding violence, together with collusion between corrupt government actors and criminal entrepreneurs, appears to be the most reasonable explanation for the decrease in the visibility of violence in Juárez. In essence, the criminal-political arrangements are returning to those resembling the days of PRI dominance when overt violence was suppressed by the effective control exercised by the state.

Scoperto noted the disadvantages violence presents for criminal organizations: “Violence is a problem. It leads to discovery [by law enforcement]. In the past when you could negotiate [with other gangs], it was easier to keep unwanted attention away. For a long time, the Mexican law wasn’t equal. As long as you did things quietly, you could get away literally with murder. If you did get caught, the sentence was lenient. Now, with all of the violence, the laws are changing. The [Mexican] government is looking for ways to send murderers to the U.S. to get punished.”

Scoperto's functionalist argument alone cannot explain when violence escalates<sup>30</sup>. We must understand whether law enforcement's ability to effectively investigate or the public's ability to demand a law enforcement response to a point that obligates one to happen affects the presence of violence. When the state is unable or unwilling to investigate, the performance of violence becomes a powerful tool to intimidate opponents or witnesses. To that end, with the successful extraditions and U.S. convictions of Edgar "La Barbie" Valdez Villarreal and Jesus Vicente Zambada Niebla, the son of Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, among many others (Daugherty 2015, Department of Justice 2010), it appears that the Mexican government is making an effort to show that, despite their ongoing struggles, they can maintain control well enough to deter future ostentatious drug traffickers from drawing too much attention to themselves or risk arrest and prosecution. Nonetheless, the ongoing violence in Mexico indicates that these efforts may not yet be effective.

Pancho, a current Azteca member, who enjoyed an intermediate status in the gang hierarchy, commented that acts of violence are now less blatant in Juárez: "Well, there is violence, but not like it used to be. Like leaving the bodies out on the street. Now they bury them. Now it's like back in the days; they do it under water<sup>31</sup>," Pancho explained.

"What caused people to change that behaviour?" I asked.

"The U.S. government was about to go in over there. They just wanted to take the heat<sup>32</sup> off the bridge [that connects El Paso and Juárez]. Everybody was losing money."

"Everybody, as in everybody who?"

"All the cartels." Pancho said. "All the people that was moving something. They were losing money because all the heat they brought to the bridge. They needed to stop that."

Third, violence can drop when one group asserts a monopoly over protection in a *plaza* (Durán Martínez 2015a, Magaloni et al. 2015). This was the case in Ciudad

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<sup>30</sup> For example, in Italy, the anti-Mafia proceedings led to the murders of many anti-mafia actors including judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. The actions were an attempt to halt the anti-Mafia efforts by intimidating any survivors. Nonetheless, the violence ultimately resulted in the promulgation of various anti-mafia measures (Paoli 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Doing something underwater means to act in a manner that does not draw attention.

<sup>32</sup> Law enforcement attention.



Acuña, Coahuila, a town which is uncontested and under the control of the Zetas, according to “Cartel Maps” that attempt to map DTO presence within Mexico (e.g. Stratfor 2015). While visiting the area, I met an American woman named April, who lived in the sleepy border town of Del Rio, Texas, but worked across the border as an engineer in one of the maquiladoras owned by a major American company.

“I work in Acuña every day and we don’t really have any problems there either. The Zetas control the area, yes, and sometimes there might be a dust up, so we work for a day or two in our warehouse in Del Rio until the story of what happened comes out. But, it’s never for very long,” April explained. “[Violence] has never affected me [directly]. I think that there isn’t a whole lot of criminal activity or drug trafficking or even drug use around here because it’s hard [to do those activities]. There are all of the military guys and there are lots of Border Patrol agents. There is the DEA, too.”



**Photo 7: Downtown Ciudad Acuña.**

April noted that Mexican police aren’t a problem for her, and that was the case even before the corrupt local cops were replaced by *Federales*. Moreover, she was not convinced that the *Federales* were any less corrupt than the local smokies had been. “Having Texas or Coahuila plates will usually ensure that the police will leave you alone. Sometimes our workers get transferred in from another Mexican state and they don’t change their plates. That’s when I’ve heard of people getting into a bind not with the police, but [with] the Zetas who are afraid their foreign plates belong to spies from another criminal organization. We tell new employees that they need to change their

plates over for that reason.” In short, the main concern that her workers faced was being subjected to DTO efforts to assert control.

Fourth, violence may drop when competing DTOs engage as an economic cartel and collude with one another (Castillo 2014). This practice serves two purposes: one, it minimizes the human, monetary, and security costs of violence, which after a certain point become so expensive that an enterprise cannot survive and grow when taken in the aggregate. And, two, it allows the DTOs to work more efficiently in terms of trafficking.

The people who were closest to the criminal action, the gang members and the police, doubt the dominance of the Sinaloa Federation in the Juárez *plaza*, which is the predominate narrative presented by most law enforcement outside El Paso (Texas Department of Public Safety 2015, 2014). El Paso-based law enforcement and gang members alike thought that the *plaza* was still in contest; the violence was being controlled either through an understanding between the DTOs or a ceasefire that was, in fact, a period of retooling. The view that the Sinaloa Federation dominates the drug market is tenuous given the lack of Sinaloa affiliated outlets present in El Paso to offload product into the U.S. Nonetheless, that dynamic could be quickly changing given the October 2014 arrest of Juárez Cartel boss Vicente Carrillo Fuentes and the April 2015 arrest of his successor Jesús “El Chuyin” Aguayo (Varandani 2015). Additionally, 2014 saw the conclusion of a three-year long law enforcement operation that led to the indictment of 55 Barrio Azteca members (Texas Department of Public Safety 2015). To date, little further information regarding the status of the Juárez Cartel or the status of the BA members has been made public.

Still, there are bursts of significant violence within Mexico, which is often credited to DTO infighting (Grayson 2009, Ríos 2013, Reuter 2009, Friman 2009) or to “high-intensity criminality” related to the drug trade (Kan 2012). In Mexico, such DTO-related violence has several notable loci in terms of press coverage. These “hot spots” are typically mid- to large-size cities on or near the U.S.-Mexico border or are port cities where drugs, or the precursor products used to synthesize them, are being imported from South America and Asia. From what I could see, the U.S. side of the border was not hot at all; it didn’t even seem lukewarm.

## FIVE: *LA CARRUCHA* (THE RIDE)

### *A LATENT FEAR*

One day in late May 2014, the five o'clock news panned to a shot of a billboard with a graffiti tag that boldly stated: "Plata o Plomo," a threat which had been publicly issued by DTOs in the past via *narcomantas* or blankets hung from freeway overpasses in Mexico (Campbell 2014). Take the bribe or take a bullet. The local TV press misreported the message as saying "pay or take the bribe." At first glance, I thought the message was just more of the same, but this time the billboard was not south of the border. It was in El Paso. And such billboard messages had never appeared in Chucotown before. There was another billboard with a message written in English: "Dying for Drugs." Both the billboards had dressed mannequins hanging from nooses attached to the platforms.

The messages had appeared mysteriously overnight in the far eastern part of the city and nobody could make sense of them. The press seemed to latch onto the "Plata o Plomo" message, and a moment of panic ensued. The heavy coverage of violence across the border fostered an ongoing latent fear that the violence might actually spill over from violent Juárez into peaceful El Paso. Theories abounded – was it gonzo advertising for a movie? Or, *holy shit*, had the violence finally crossed? The month of May had been an especially deadly month in Juárez, but the border had been completely militarized and closely scrutinized so the possibility of violence seemed unreasonable. Plus, what the hell did "Dying for Drugs" mean? That didn't seem like a cartel threat.

Some in the media as well as people whom I knew in Chuco were sceptical that anyone would put up these billboards for a prank, but then came the news report that the police had arrested a suspect and had established his presence to the crime scenes with finger prints. Graffiti artist Ryan Edward Jean of Las Vegas, Nevada, was arrested as he tried to fly back, after a fingerprint found on the scene matched his record in a national police database (Valdez 2014). Jean said that he vandalized the billboards to make a political statement. It was clearly lost in translation.

### *THE SPILLOVER CONCERN*

The billboard prank had raised the possibility that the drug violence in Mexico might, for the first time, spill over the border. The Mexican government's inability to

control violence and provide security to its citizens is of little concern to U.S. border inhabitants who live in cities and towns with murder rates lower than their Mexican counterparts right across the border (Wilson n.d., Solomon 2015). Despite political claims to the contrary, the U.S. side of the border remains safe, with any “spillover effect” being felt in Mexico, as guns are smuggled into Mexico from the United States (Dube, Dube, and García-Ponce 2013).

Corruption on the U.S. side of the border exists. One CBP agent, who was giving me a border tour, told me that the George W. Bush administration’s call to double the size of the Border Patrol was a mixed blessing.

“We were 10,000 agents in 2005. [By] 2008/2009 we were up to 21,000 agents. We doubled in size and [the George W. Bush administration] wanted to get it done in two years. It’s a good thing in that we got people, personnel; we got some infrastructure. The bad thing is that we got a lot of bad seeds that made it through. Some of the cartel families, they have their kids [or] their associates run a clean life. [These people] don’t get arrested, don’t get pulled over, [and] don’t even get involved in drugs. [They] just go to school. [Then they might] join the police force, [but actually work for the cartels.... The authorities] busted a lot here within El Paso sector; [crooked agents] were escorting drug lords around or selling our secrets or the way that we work<sup>33</sup>.”

Yet, had the “plata o plomo” threat been genuine, it would have marked a serious escalation in terms of outward DTO-driven rhetoric in the U.S. And it would have provoked a firestorm of law enforcement and a possible shut down of the border. Such a swell of police presence or a shutdown would greatly reduce the value of the Juárez *plaza* since its logistical advantages, in terms of the superior ability to transport assets—including drugs, money, and weapons—through the area, while connecting to the major road conduit Interstate-10, would be greatly reduced.

For DTOs, bringing violence to the U.S. side of the border and making the violence visible only increases risk and makes little business sense. Investigative journalist Bill Conroy, who has covered narcoviolence for several years, discredits the

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<sup>33</sup> The CBP agent’s view was consistent with a reported uptick of corruption to a level that alarmed officials at the time (Archibold and Becker 2008), but said little about the history or status of corruption within CBP previously.

notion of a general trend of drug-related violence crossing over into the U.S. to a point of reasonable concern.

“[Nonetheless, there are a few] rural pockets where the murder rate shot up. And that, to me, was kind of interesting [... T]he way it was explained to me is that if someone wants to murder you in San Antonio, they are smart if they take you out to [...] a smaller county and [kill you] because the [rural] police force is not used to dealing with those crimes.”

It appears that when violence does happen in the U.S., it happens in a way that minimizes risk to illicit business interests.

“You have to remember, [drug traffickers] are businessmen,” Elizabeth Kempshall, then director of the Arizona HIDTA (High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area), told me. “They don’t want to do anything that is going to cost them more money to do their business. If they start having that violence that’s occurring in Mexico occurring here in the United States, then the United States is going to rise up and get more committed to stopping that type of activity from coming across the border. So, when [Americans] rise up, put more forces on the border, [and] shut the border down [...], the cartels, in effect, are hampered in making money. So, they don’t want to encourage that type of activity.”

Yet, one of the strange facets of El Paso is the presence of Barrio Azteca, the most infamous prison gang of the area during the time of my visit. They are a symbol of the violence in Juárez. In 2010, members of the gang, working on behalf of the Juárez Cartel, shot and killed U.S. consulate worker Lesley A. Enriquez and her husband Arthur H. Redelf as well as Jorge Alberto Salcido Cenicerros, the husband of another U.S. consulate worker (Lacey and Thompson 2010). The Barrio Azteca lieutenant, Arturo Gallegos Castrellón, who ordered the slayings was sentenced to life in prison in 2014 (FBI 2014). The various gang members and law enforcement personnel I interviewed told me that Barrio Azteca had a clear presence in El Paso’s underworld, even though violence was not commonplace in the city. Violence is not typically necessary, because BA has maintained a near monopoly in the criminal underworld for the better part of the past two decades, thereby obviating the need for violence. Moreover, violence would almost certainly bring unwanted law enforcement attention.

*BARRIO AZTECA BEGINS*

José “Raulio” Rivera Fierro<sup>34</sup>, the founder of Barrio Azteca, grew up in the Sandoval tenement houses on the west side of El Paso, just minutes away from the Texas-New Mexico border. From a broken home with an abusive, alcoholic father, José spent his childhood engaging in delinquent activities, such as stealing, dealing drugs, and doing drugs, activities which repeatedly landed him in the D-Home, a residential house for delinquent youths. Over the years, José graduated from huffing glue and smoking weed to slamming heroin and, together with that change, his criminal activity increased. Eventually, he was caught for burglary and, after violating his probation, he was sentenced to prison, where he spent most of the next decade.

No matter how bad prison was, José was, in some ways, happy to be going to prison: “My plan was at last coming to fruition. I was following in the footsteps of my role models” (Rivera Fierro unpublished). He entered prison in 1978, a scrappy 5’3” kid who realized that he needed to out crazy most people by playing the role of the tough guy in order to be left alone. By 1981, he was transferred to the Coffield Unit, near Tennessee Colony, Texas. For the first few years of his incarceration, José cultivated an image of himself: he was likeable but also tough enough to take care of himself, a necessary characteristic if he was to defend himself from the unwanted advances of the inmate guards, also known as “turnkeys.”

These inmate guards were selected by a panel of Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) officials, often because of their physical prowess, to serve as the

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<sup>34</sup> I was introduced to José “Raulio” Rivera Fierro by the late Charles “Chuck” Bowden, or rather, Chuck gave José my phone number and José called me one day out of the blue. I volunteered to work on a memoir manuscript that José (the name that he prefers today) had written and sent to Chuck after hearing him on NPR, speaking about the violence in Juárez. The content of this section is largely based on the manuscript José has written and the three interviews I conducted with him in person, which were undertaken to flesh out the creation story of Barrio Azteca.

The origins of Barrio Azteca, like the origins of many gangs, are murky. Limited information is available in various corners of the internet as well as some printed resources that seem to echo what is available online. José is usually mentioned as one of the founding members, though his nickname is never correctly identified. Shortly before he died in the fall of 2014, Chuck told me that he had looked into José’s prison records and he was as billed. José’s account of prison life is consistent with the few articles that have been published regarding the events that occurred while he was in prison that led to the development of Barrio Azteca, with dates being very close to the published accounts, though often differing by one or two years. Consequently, the dates within this section should be considered approximate.

primary providers of security within the prison walls (Marquart and Crouch 1984). Not only did the turnkeys “effectively maintain order among the inmates (frequently through the use of force) [... but they also] served as an intelligence network for prison officials” (Fong 1990, 36). It was a control strategy that made Texas prisons “perhaps the most orderly prison system in the country” (Dilulio 1990, 53). It was a con-boss system that allowed the inmate guards to abuse the inmates in exchange for keeping order (Dilulio 1990).

“Every unit was run by ‘politicians,’” José explained. “They worked both sides. They were inmates that worked for the man and they pretty much had authority. They could tell the man things and could get you hurt. They were running the show still [when I got to Coffield. ...] I felt small. I hadn’t felt that small in a long time.”

One of the building tenders attempted to “Ike and Mike<sup>35</sup>” José, or, in other words, attempted to turn him into his prostitute. José played along just enough to extract favours but without prostituting himself. His intuition and charisma allowed him to make the alliances necessary to survive and to gain the trust and respect of his fellow El Paso inmates. And, even though he was in prison, life was steady, once he got past the initial learning curve of how to deal with the unit politics.

In 1983, those politics changed. A decade earlier, Texas inmate David Ruiz sued TDC director, W.J. Estelle, Jr., stating that he was being subjected to conditions which amounted to cruel and unusual punishment<sup>36</sup>. In 1981, as part of his ruling in favour of Ruiz’s claim, Judge William Wayne Justice ordered the TDC to phase out the building tender system (Justice 1981).

Judge Justice’s decree created two problems for the TDC, given the two-year timescale provided for institutional change. First, since the turnkeys could no longer fulfil their security role, the TDC faced shortages in security staff. The security shortages were compounded by the inexperience of the new guards who were at a loss as to how to go about controlling the inmates; both inmates and guards felt that the balance of power, or the ability to affect control, had shifted into the inmate’s favour (Ekland-Olson 1986, Rivera Fierro unpublished). The lack of control within the prison became

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<sup>35</sup> “Ike and Mike” rhymes with “spike;” it indicates an attempt to convince a person to have sex.

<sup>36</sup> Ruiz v. Estelle, 503 F. Supp. 1265 (S.D. Tex. 1980)

obvious in 1984 when the number of inmate homicides reached 25, a rate of 7 per 10,000 inmates, which “was well ahead of all other systems [and] more than double the number (twelve) of the previous two high years, 1981 and 1982” (Ekland-Olson 1986, 392). That number would be eclipsed the following year (Burman 2012). Most the killings were gang related (Fong 1990). Second, without the turnkeys, the TDC no longer had the insider intelligence that allowed them to keep tabs on prison developments (Fong 1990). In short, the decree ensured that the protection market within the prison walls was now open for competition.

“As soon as that suit hit and [the TDC] had to get rid of the building tenders, it caught the Prison Administration with their pants down because they weren’t expecting it. [...] During that transition period, all hell broke loose,” José recalled. “It started in 1983. It [continued for] about two years. [The TDC] had to train a bunch of guards. [...] They just needed bodies in uniform. They were inexperienced [and] guards were getting beat up. Blacks especially were just going off on guards.”

Regardless whether José’s claims regarding the violence undertaken by black inmates is true, the guards did fear the inmates; in the aftermath of the fall of the building tender system, assaults on the prison staff skyrocketed system wide from four in 1981 to 129 in 1984 (Marquart and Crouch 1984).

“The guards were scared, and some of them would kind of like hang out with us because we treated them well,” José said. “We weren’t being assholes to them, but the blacks – a major [for the prison guards] got stabbed and [the black inmates] were just scary for the guards, as well as for everybody else. [...] It was out of hand, out of control chaos. Chaos was the rule of the day.”

Writing about the turmoil within the California prison system that occurred in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, former prisoner John Irwin describes how the prisoners formed pseudo-familial structures in order to mediate disputes among themselves. However, as racial hatred reached a high level among the inmates, “cliques increasingly became organized for their own members’ protection” (Irwin 1980, 74). This evolution of organization was echoed in the TDC. In the decade following the downfall of the building tender system, several groups formed along racial and national lines, which in time would be classified by the TDC as security threat groups (STGs), or, colloquially, prison gangs.

Amongst the Hispanic inmate community in Texas, the only group to predate the fall of the building tender system was the Texas Syndicate (TS), “a self-protection



gang formed by a group of prisoners who had been members of the Texas Syndicate in the prisons in California” (Fong 1990, 36). The TS is a long-standing organisation that developed in the 1970s in Folsom and San Quentin in response to the harassment of native Texan inmates who were serving time in the California penitentiary system (Fleisher and Decker 2001). TS was introduced to the Texas prison system by inmates who had been members in California and were subsequently locked up in Texas.

The first Hispanic group to appear after TS in the 1980s was the Mexican Mafia, also referred to as the *Mexikanemi* or *Eme*, not to be confused with organizations in California, Arizona, and elsewhere that bear the same name (Texas Department of Public Safety 2007). According to José, the Eme and TS initially coexisted, given the instability that occurred as the prison transitioned out of the building tender system and as Hispanics needed unity amongst themselves to counter the blacks.

By 1985, at least eight prisoner groups had formed and included Hispanic, black, and white groups (Fong 1990). These groups, along with a now more experienced prison staff, were able to re-establish within the prison walls an effective social order that remained throughout the latter half of the decade. As a result, the chaotic scenes of inter-racial conflict that characterized '83, '84, and '85 dissipated, but the peace between the Eme and TS ended when a dispute over the control of the prison drug trade triggered a war between the two groups.

According to José, “The Texas Syndicate went to the [upstart] Mexican Mafia at the Darrington Unit [where the Eme were selling weed] and told them, ‘You know what, we want a cut. You got to pay taxes.’ Now, the TS thought [the Eme would] be scared of them, that they were just going to lay down. But the Eme were no punks either. They were standup, too; they were somebody to be reckoned with.”

Violence escalated between the Eme and TS which had become the two largest prison gangs in the Texas prison system and brought the unwanted attention of the prison administration to them. The prison guards responded by isolating everyone they could identify as a leader of those organizations into administrative segregation (Fleisher and Decker 2001). With leadership weakened and in need of replacements, both TS and the Eme now vied for recruits who would replenish the ranks and effectively challenge the other for dominance in the penitentiary. In their efforts to recruit, both TS and the Eme relaxed their entry requirements.

“They said, ‘Man, you don’t have to kill anyone to get in or all that stuff,’” José recounted. “I said, ‘Still, I don’t think so.’ They told me, ‘Man, if you join, there’s a lot of

people who are going to follow you.' I said, 'no.' I just put a stop to it. Between 1984 and 1985, [the prison authorities] just started locking [the gang leaders] up because it got out of hand."

For their part, the boys of El Paso had remained mostly neutral, respecting each organization. But then TS and the Eme began to ask the Chuco crew to pick sides. Neither José nor his fellow El Pasoans wanted to be part of the bloodbath, so he rebuffed their advances. Eventually, José decided to start his own organization to provide enough of a structure as to preclude other groups from recruiting the El Paso boys.

One day, José was smoking a joint with his pal Benny Acosta when the idea to start a *carrucha*, "a ride," for the El Paso and Juárez boys occurred to him: "[We were] talking about all of the shit that had been happening on the unit. A couple more of our homeboys had joined the gangs, and I was not feeling too happy about it. [...] El Paso had always been sort of a pseudo-gang, and now we were about to get swallowed up by bigger fish," José recounted (Rivera Fierro unpublished).

"I told Benny, 'You know what, man? *Vamos a comenzar una carrucha. ¿Cómo vez? Pues, toda la gente está puesta*<sup>37</sup>.' And he said, '*No estuviera mal Raulio. Aquí vamos a hablar con la gente en la yarda en la tarde.*<sup>38</sup>'"

José called a meeting in the yard that evening, to poll interest in starting a ride, a gang for the inmates from El Paso and Juárez. José was likeable and had the respect of his El Paso peers; moreover, the others wanted no part of the war between TS and the Eme. So, most of the El Paso and Juárez people who had been called to the meeting joined José's upstart group. José instituted a rough hierarchical order, placing him at the top with four or five captains under him (he cannot remember definitively if there was a fifth). The rest were put on the ride as "soldiers," emulating the structure of the other organizations in prison.

Nonetheless, "there was no blood in, blood out [to join]," José explained. Membership was informal: "There was just, yeah, 'I'm in the gang,' just by saying it." During the meeting, José suggested using the name "Barrio Azteca," in reference to his

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<sup>37</sup> Let's start our own ride [gang]. What do you think? Everyone is there.

<sup>38</sup> It wouldn't be bad, Raulio. Let's have a meeting in the yard this evening with our people and talk it over.

Mexican heritage and a neighbourhood in El Paso; the name stuck. The next day, José used his job pushing a broom throughout the unit to go everywhere and get the word out. Barrio Azteca had been born.

Despite the hierarchical organization of the group, José described the initial objectives to be twofold: one, to provide solidarity for the guys who were from El Paso and Juárez when they entered the prison system and, two, to ensure that the group would not be part of, or victimised by, the other prison gangs. Perhaps José's primary reason for creating Barrio Azteca was to provide support and develop solidarity among the Hispanic inmates from El Paso and Juárez. The most common way to show support to incoming inmates is to provide basic goods, such as coffee and hygiene products, that incoming inmates do not have.

It is an exercise of soft power which attempts to entice new inmates to join the ranks of the group under the banner of "brotherhood," which underpins the maintenance of protection. Nonetheless, Barrio Azteca soon evolved from a group that sought to avoid war within the prison walls, to a group that sought to forcefully carve out its own place in the criminal underworld. Yet, in my conversations with José, he downplayed the violence of the early incarnation group, particularly on the streets, while implicitly acknowledging its authoritarian streak as it evolved and grew.

One such example comes from the establishment of the Mexicles that occurred shortly after the birth of BA. The Mexicles started as a group of *paisas*<sup>39</sup>, or Mexican nationals, who had grouped together for probably many of the same reasons José formed the Aztecas.

"The Mexicles were an upstart group. They formed because we alienated and shunned them when they wouldn't join us. They were a very small group," Jose explained. It's not an incidental history: today the Mexicles, who are primarily based in Ciudad Juárez, are the chief adversaries of the Aztecas there, having allied themselves with the Sinaloa Cartel. The violence between the two groups has been possibly the largest driver of the city's exorbitant body count over the past decade (Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015).

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<sup>39</sup> *Paisa* is a bastardization of *paisano*, meaning countryman in Spanish. Though it is often used to mean Mexican national, it can refer to any native Spanish-speaking, non-American Latino.

José also downplayed his role in Barrio Azteca's development, saying he was unaware of the group's development due, in part, to his heroin use and his general lack of interest in the gang while he was not incarcerated. Barrio Azteca began to emulate the Eme and TS quite early on (c.f. Fong 1990). By José's final stint in prison, from 2006 to 2008, Barrio Azteca had completely evolved into a prison gang that was as big as, and often bigger than, the Texas Mexican Mafia and the Texas Syndicate in many of the units throughout the TDC. Like its predecessors, BA created a presence beyond the prison walls. José talked about the gang's presence in El Paso county jail which amounted to its ability to control inmate politics within that institution and how that control affected activity on the streets of Chuco. For instance, it was the control over the county jail that allowed José to reduce drive-by shootings in the city by making sure anybody who was sent to county jail for committing a drive-by would be punished.

"I was at my sister's house, and this was in '89, like the third to fourth time I got out, whatever, and I'm watching the news and there's a drive-by: little girl gets shot in the head," José said. "She was just sitting doing her math homework and somebody drove by and shot at the house and shot and killed her. [...] It tore me up, but I knew that I ran the County Jail, that all my people, it's all Azteca. [...] I let it be known, you know what, *'Ponga la palabra, que no va a ver drive-bys. Al otro güey que caiga por un drive, le tumba por un cantón*<sup>40</sup>."

From what current gang members told me, the policy remains in effect to this day and explains why drive-by shootings in El Paso are unusual. Its continued enforcement, however, may have more to do with keeping unwanted attention from law enforcement at bay. The enactment of this policy marks the beginning of Barrio Azteca's power over the streets of El Paso.

As José's influence faded and his ambitious captains took over, Barrio Azteca became increasingly violent. By some accounts, the gang had a written constitution, formalizing its structure, code of conduct, and objectives (Ortiz Uribe 2014, FBI 2010), though no gang members I ever met referred to it. Undoubtedly, the new captains

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<sup>40</sup> Put the word out that there are not going to be anymore drive-bys. The next guy who goes down for a drive-by, kick his ass.

helped transform Barrio Azteca from the solidarity group that José established into one of the most notorious prison gangs in the state of Texas during the 1990s and 2000s.

As the Aztecas grew, they expanded their recruitment efforts from prison to the county jail. Street gang members who would get locked up in county were vetted to see if they had any “jackets<sup>41</sup>,” such as a history of being a snitch or a child molester, and if no disqualifying jackets appeared were sometimes offered the opportunity to join the gang. Prospective members were and continue to be vetted through a system of communication using *wilas* or kites<sup>42</sup>.

In an effort to gain information on a possible prospect, *wilas* are sent to members in neighbouring cells. In some cases, these notes are smuggled outside jail or prison for outside vetting. In addition, prospects have to “put in work” by engaging in risky behaviour which their superiors order them to do, such as keeping the shanks for the gang or assaulting another inmate. The gang ideally wants to recruit only members who would be fully committed to the gang life.

Today, people who attempt to leave are stigmatized, as is the case with most prison gangs. Membership in the Aztecas is a lifelong commitment with ex-members being deemed *persona non grata*, with a standing “green light” on them should they leave the organization (Ortiz Uribe 2014). In this instance, a green light indicates that, at least in theory, existing members have a duty to attempt to kill ex-members who leave the fold. Leaving the gang is complicated. Ex-members understand the risks of being an *equis*, so they do their best to avoid situations which place them at risk of an attack. For example, they avoid going out on the town and committing crimes that could see them incarcerated again. When avoiding trouble is not possible, ex-members might be forced to go on the offensive.

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<sup>41</sup> *Jacketing* is a concept that the gang members adopted from the prison administrators whereby an inmate would be jacketed if he were to have a negative history recorded in his official file (Fleisher and Decker 2001, Hunt et al. 1993).

<sup>42</sup> *Kite* is the general term for this means of communication with *wila* being the term used specifically by Hispanic gangs. A kite takes its name from its original physical form. It was a note that had a string attached to it. An inmate would try to land the note within reach of his target, but the string was there so that in the event the initial placement failed, he could pull the note back and try again. This strategy ensured that information communicated would not easily fall in the hands of the guards should the note fail to reach its intended destination. Both terms have come to mean a form of communication between gang members in prison or between prison and the free world.

“As an *equis*, if you come across a young guy who is active, you have to beat his ass, because you know they are supposed to kill you,” Scoperto said. “You have to assert yourself. If you don’t, you’ll end up dead.”

Such a ruthless attitude was necessary to effectively contest the established TS and Eme for dominance of the protection market within prison, assert control over the El Paso county jail, and establish Barrio Azteca’s criminal *bona fides* on the streets of El Paso and Juárez and beyond.

### *DIFFICULTIES WITH PRISON POLITICS: ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY AND MAINTAINING CONTROL*

Staying out of the prison political system is difficult; membership to a prison gang or racial organization is commonplace (Skarbek 2012). All prisoners, regardless of their race, are offered the opportunity to join some sort of solidarity organization within prison – though not necessarily a prison gang – as a means to navigate and participate in the politics of inside. Recruitment is a process that featured in nearly every “first day” story I heard and the details of that particular story were recounted with remarkable consistency. Only the players involved, depending on the respondent’s race or street gang affiliation, and the terms used for the various roles within the prison order differed. Nonetheless, these distinctions underscore the important role that race plays in the social order of prisons (Jacobs 1979, Skarbek 2014). Although racial segregation within prisons has been banned, prisoners in Texas, Arizona, and California all self-segregate by race (Tapia, Sparks, and Miller 2014, Skarbek 2014, Marquart and Crouch 1984, Wacquant 2000).

The TDC evaluates and classifies inmates and then transfers them to an assigned unit. Upon arrival, inmates who have never done prison time before are often recruited by a member of a prison organization that identifies the inmate as being a member of its race and/or a denizen of a particular city. This city may be one in which the gang already has a presence or one where the gang wishes to expand its presence. For any gang, recruiting members from cities where it wishes to have a street presence allows it to assert control over street gangs outside the prison walls. Members who leave prison typically return to the cities they come from and are expected to impose a supra-governmental structure over the street gangs of those cities. Fundamentally, recruitment is a process that reinforces the inmate adage, “stick with your own,” which describes the *de-facto* racial segregation that often occurs in jail and prison (Wacquant 2000).

New inmates then have two options. First, new inmates can join the lowest ranks of a prison gang's political structure. (Returning inmates re-enter at the rank they previously held or higher.) Whether an inmate climbs the hierarchy remains his choice; he can remain at the bottom and enjoy the fringe benefits of protection offered to him by the overarching structure to which he pertains.

Cultural exceptions to the racial policies of prison politics occur when someone does not identify with any particular group, such as an Asian man, or when an atypical street gang association exists. Such associations typically override racial considerations, though not without conflict.

"Being white caused a big problem for me, especially in prison, especially the fact that I'm a GD, too," said Bradley, a white member of the Gangster Disciples, a gang that originated in Chicago and that features a primarily black membership. "First off, I had AB come after me. AB came after me and I told them, 'Look, I'm just here to do my time.' That's what I told them and I tried to be respectful about it. I ain't trying to cause no problems with them. I'm just here to do my time. 'Alright, we'll see you around, 'Wood.'"

The Aryan Brotherhood expected Bradley to be a Peckerwood, a non-gang affiliated white person in prison. When he refused to acknowledge that designation, AB attempted to assault him; his gang, the GDs, helped him defend the attack.

The second option a new (or returning) inmate has upon entering prison, is to attempt to ride his time out on his own by becoming a *solano* or a "neutron" – someone who is not involved with the prisoners' political structure – while still observing the rules of racial segregation imposed by the prison gangs (Skarbek 2014). Riding solo is a tough life because it means that one cannot depend on the other members of one's race in the event of a conflict with another inmate. It also means fewer privileges within prison.

"[Solanos] don't have no privileges. Families [prison gangs] come first," Pancho explained. "If you don't run with nobody, you don't get a chair to sit or nothing like that. You sit in your bunk if you want or you can sit on the floor, but only the families have the table."

"You can just roll *solano*, but you're a fucking nobody," said Joey, a former inmate who had associated with Chuco Tango while he did his time. "You're up for grabs, pretty much. Everybody can fuck with you and nobody's going to see anything."

Joining a prison gang, even at its lowest levels is thus an attractive option for an inmate in need of protection. “It’s not like you have very many options,” Scoperto noted. “You can join a gang to gain protection, or you can be extorted by them. Some people can be *solanos*, but it’s hard. You still have to follow everybody’s rules. The *solanos* are few and far between. So what happens is that you help the prison gangs fill their ranks. They overcome their weak position by recruiting people in.”

“I became an *esquina*<sup>43</sup>, in other words a prospect,” Bruce, a former Barrio Azteca member recalled. “I started doing dirt. In ISF<sup>44</sup>, they had a lot of sex offenders. So we started preying on sex offenders, as far as if you had a child sex crime, you’d have to pay at least a hundred and fifty a week. I didn’t care how you got it. Either call your Mom, call your Dad, call somebody – shit, a hundred and fifty dollars.”

Prospecting is not unique to the Hispanic gangs. Ian, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, described the expectations a prospect must meet when he decides to join the gang: “When you prospect, whatever they tell you to do you *have* to do. [... The gang leaders will] get you and a couple of other prospects, or even by yourself, and tell you go discipline that person [for whatever reason]; and you go and you [beat them up]. Or they put an S.O.S. – which is ‘smash on sight’ – on them. And if you see them, regardless – it could be in front of the major or the... it could be in front of anybody. You could be on the side of the walkway or the causeway, you’d have to run across and just start smashing them. If you don’t, you get smashed on and you are no longer prospecting.”

Asking recruits to engage in violence on behalf of the gang is an inexpensive way to reinforce the protection offered by the gang. The protection model instituted by the prison gangs which came into existence in the 1980s in the Texas prison system was not challenged effectively until the rise of the *Tangos*, in the early 2000s (though some *Tangos* were founded in the late 1990s). The *Tangos* sought system-wide control by replacing the vertically organized prison gangs with horizontally organized groups.

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<sup>43</sup> To have someone’s *esquina* means to have someone’s back. It comes from the idea that you cannot be easily attacked from behind if you are fighting in a corner.

<sup>44</sup> Intermediate Sanction Facility. It is “an in-custody treatment alternative for medium to high-risk felony offenders in Texas who are facing probation or parole revocations” (Varghese Summersett & Smith 2015)



Like Barrio Azteca, the Tangos formed in order to contest the protection status quo among inmates. According to the people I interviewed who claimed to be affiliated with Tango while incarcerated, the Tangos are organizationally distinct from the prison gangs. Whereas prison gangs have strict rules and permanent associations of hardened individuals, “Tangos are people like – you and I,” Joey said. In prison slang, *tango* means *place*, and the Tango organizations are organized by the cities which their members represent (Lauderdale and Burman 2009). Today, there are several Tangos throughout the TDC, including, “D-towns [Dallas], San Antone [San Antonio], [and] West Texas [that] is a bunch of ghost towns that come together and they make a set, which is like Odessa, Plainview, Brownsville.”

“When you became a member of Mexican Mafia, Texas Syndicate, Barrio Azteca, it’s a lifelong commitment,” Charlie, a gang sergeant for EPPD, explained. “You’re going to report; you’re going to be doing for the gangs when you came out [...]. Slowly but surely, people began saying, ‘You know what? I don’t want to have to report to anybody when I leave [prison].’ So that’s when the mentality of the Tango Blast came to be. You become Tango Blast while you’re in prison. When you come back [out], you go back to whatever normal life that you came from.”

Though some scholars state that the various Tangos served as *esquina*, or back up, for established Latino prison gangs (Tapia 2014, Tapia, Sparks, and Miller 2014), the members of Chuco Tango whom I interviewed never mentioned that role. Instead, the rise and continued presence of the Tangos can be explained by analysing shifts in the protection market. First, as Charlie noted, individual inmates who were going to prison were weary of the required commitment that the established prison gangs demanded of them. As Lauderdale and Burman (2009) state, “Membership in a Tango is more fluid than in an identified security threat group, or prison gang, as members maintain their street gang influence without the commitment to the prison gang upon release back to the community” (263).

Second, the TDC was successful in identifying gang leadership and isolating it. By putting gang leadership into “super-max” conditions, the prison administration sought to reduce “prison social order to its lowest possible relevance by increasing the level of isolation of the inmate from both other inmates and the staff toward the theoretical limits [...] of total segregation” (Simon 2000, 301). Despite the established prison gangs’ paramilitary system of hierarchical order, such a strategy is effective in limiting their abilities to promote new leadership and recruit new members.

Nonetheless, as in California, when the prison administration broke the monopoly on protection that established organizations held (Hunt et al. 1993), a space for new organizations, in this case the Tangos, opened.

“Barrio Azteca is in lockdown right now,” Frank told me. “But, before, in ’07 [when] I would go to county for some crimes or whatever, Barrio Azteca was up there and they would try to recruit you and they would tell you, “Hey, you’re a *cora* – *¿Quieres ser cora*<sup>45</sup>? – that means to be like their maids in other words.”

“Right now, Chuco Tango and GD run the [county jail] annex,” said Bradley with a certain degree of bravado. He was a member of the GDs and had been recently released from prison. “[If t]hey find out you’re Barrio Azteca over in Sanchez, the state jail here, ooh-wee, I’m sorry to hear that! Actually, state-wide across prisons – I’ve heard this, time and time again – [if] you’re Barrio Azteca, you’re getting put in lockdown. Off the beat, they’re going to lock you down because Barrio Azteca ain’t shit. They really ain’t shit other than here in El Paso. Nowhere else. And nobody else gives them any clout anywhere in Texas. In prison, you don’t see them anywhere. You don’t see any 2-1<sup>46</sup> tattoos. You don’t see any of that shit.”

The Tangos have so far managed to avoid being locked down by employing a horizontal model. Instead of having a vertically controlled organization with strict rules, they recruit members who are given equal status among the group. Unlike hierarchically organized prison gangs, they do not have clear shot callers (Skarbek 2014). Instead, norms are enforced by mob rule. The strategy has been successful in recruiting members (Texas Department of Public Safety 2007, 2015), potentially expanding to the point where, without a clear leadership system to target, the TDC may have limited options in terms of breaking the Tango’s control within the prison system. Nonetheless, Charlie suspects that it is only a matter of time before, like Barrio Azteca, the Tangos become more organized and start having a street presence. However, for the time being, the drug trade of the streets of El Paso is still dominated by Barrio Azteca.

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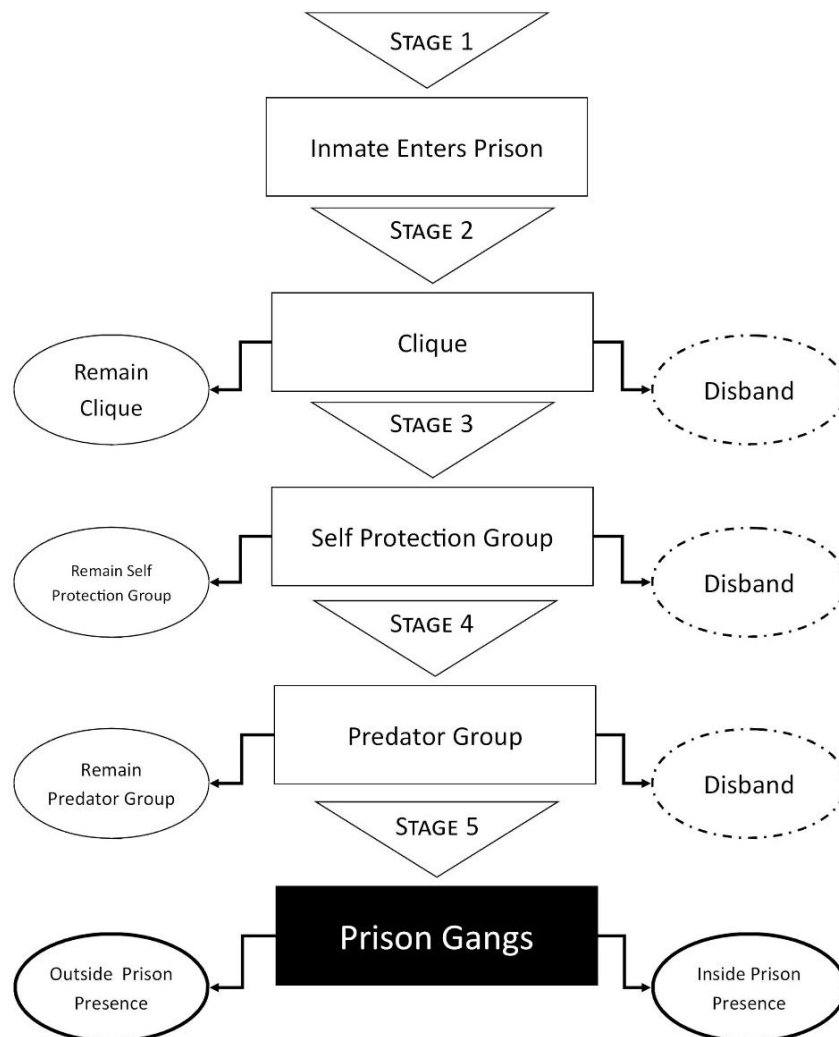
<sup>45</sup> *Cora*, short for *corazón* – heart – is a prospect in the Barrio Azteca hierarchy. The phrase translates to: “Do you want to be a prospect?”

<sup>46</sup> 2 and 1 represent the letters B and A respectively, indicating the wearer’s membership of Barrio Azteca.

*COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE PROTECTION MARKET***Prisoner Solidarity Organizations**

The creation and organizational evolution of Barrio Azteca and Chuco Tango are consistent with the organizational paradigm in Texas men's prisons proposed by Buentello, Fong, and Vogel (1991). It is comprised of five stages:

1. Inmates enter prison and learn the rules of prison's social order;
2. Inmates join cliques which may be
  - a. ephemeral, or
  - b. fixed;
3. Fixed cliques evolve into self-protection groups;
4. Successful self-protection groups then evolve into predator groups;
5. Successful predator groups become prison gangs which seek to have a presence both inside and outside prison.



**Figure 3: Buentello et. al.'s (1991) Theoretical Model of Prison Gang Development**

This paradigm is a useful starting point in examining the historical development, evolution, and implementation of prisoner solidarity groups along with their respective protection rackets within a prison system; however, it needs to have three caveats to improve its utility. First, the paradigm describes prison dynamics in medium- to high-security units. Former prisoners who had spent their sentences in lower security yards remarked that in these yards such political structures are not enforced, due to the brevity of the sentences. Inmates in such facilities tended to abide by the rules established by the guards to avoid elongating their sentences via behavioural infractions.

Second, the paradigm may be appropriate in describing the evolution of prisoner solidarity organizations in only certain prison systems. As James Jacobs (1979, 4) warns, “It is a mistake to speak of prisons and prisoner subcultures as if only a single type existed throughout the United States. The distinctive features of each region’s social structure and culture are found in prisons as well as in other political institutions.” To that end, the paradigm does not predict or describe the internal governmental structures of the groups it predicts. The truth in Jacobs’ warning will become evident in Section IV, when we look at gang and prison life in Illinois.

Third, whether all of the stages of the paradigm are present depends upon the dynamics of the prison protection market at any given point in time. Accordingly, before considering any illicit organization and the people who comprise it, we must first understand the underlying market dynamics which give rise to these enterprises and push them into certain types of activity. José’s story of the birth of Barrio Azteca is one that has elements which parallel the development of modern-day Mexican DTOs. Fundamentally, both the prison solidarity groups that evolved into prison gangs and the Mexican DTOs are participants in protection markets.

The extent to which protection is required is a function of the “sovereign entity’s” efficacy in exercising its authority and control. In the case of a state, that entity is its government; in the case of a prison, its administration. As previously noted, the rise of Mexican DTOs stemmed from the government’s failure to impose effective control on the DTOs. The DTOs, in turn, developed protection rackets, mechanisms designed to contest the authority and control of the government, allowing them to engage in activities they wished to pursue. The dynamics of the protection market changed from being one that was an arrangement between the government and the

DTOs in a regional context, to one that was contested between competing DTOs in a national context.

Similarly, according to José, the rise of Barrio Azteca and other inmate protection organizations, stemmed from the prison administration's failure to impose effective control on the prison population. The prisoners, in turn, cliqued together, forming organizations which protected them from other predatory actors within the prison. The protection desired went beyond that which the prison administration provided. As these prisoner solidarity organizations grew, so did their market share within the protection market, and a large market share in the protection market equates to a strong protection racket. If licit protection "is supposed to make the ownership of other goods and services safe from theft and make their contractual exchange enforceable" (Skaperdas 2001, 174), illicit protection acts similarly, allowing groups to engage in other unauthorized and illicit activities, such as extortion and drug dealing (Skarbek 2012), by maintaining rules within the prison.

With the development of Barrio Azteca and Chuco Tango in prison as well as drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, we observe that the organizations engaged in collective action in response to a market demand that was created when the sovereign entities – the prison administration and the government, respectively – failed to dominate the protection market. The organizations, by entering the protection market and finding competitive success, were able to extract relatively favourable outcomes for the individuals who were united under that collective action. We have seen, in both cases, that should the sovereign entity fail to "bust" the illicit collective action (as a company might bust a trade union), then the resulting protection racket becomes the foundation upon which these organizations are able to expand their illicit business portfolio, *should they choose*, which they often do.

Returning to the Buentello, Fong, and Vogel (1991) prison organization evolutionary model, it is clear that the model in full only applies to situations where the prison administration is unable to effectively control the social dynamics within the prison *and* the established prison gangs have weakened to the point that they cannot affect authority and control either, thus permitting the existence of lower level organizations, described by stages 2, the existence of cliques, through 4, the existence of predatory groups. For the majority of the 1990s, the dominant prison gangs were able to control the protection market within the prison so that upstart cliques could not form, thus eliminating stages 2 through 4.

**Psalm 28:7**

There is, however, a notable exception to the progression proposed by Buentello et al: religious groups<sup>47</sup>. Many of the people who introduced me to respondents were ex-prisoners themselves, and often ex-gang members, who had become evangelical Christians. I had many informal conversations with them regarding the role of religion in prison, particularly given religion's continued importance in their lives and in their personal identities.

In prison, religious groups do not require protection from the other inmate groups, even those which are very predatory in nature. The physical protection religious groups enjoy is conferred on them by the high levels of respect that religious figures, including clergy, lay preachers, and strict adherents, enjoy within prison society. In many ways, this practice echoes the respect Christianity holds in American society. Thus, religious groups include individuals who might otherwise wish to remain *solano* or who are looking to exit a prison gang without the usual violent repercussions. Generally speaking, so long as a person declares a religious lifestyle and consistently upholds what is considered to be pious behaviour, not using or selling drugs, not cussing, not engaging in violent behaviour, among other typically gang-related activities, then that person is off limits to the prison gangs in terms of being a target for extortion.

Effectively, these restrictions imposed by the non-pious prisoners onto the pious ones mean that religious organizations trade in protection in slightly different terms. Unlike non-religious protection groups which offer comfort and physical security with implicit threat, the religious groups offer comfort and physical security, along with spiritual healing and redemption in the eye of the almighty should physical security fail. Religious groups' protection market share is one that is grown through evangelizing the other inmates. The benefits are similar to what might be enjoyed by the Tangos in that the members of the religious community develop comradery, enjoy a certain degree of personal security, and have no mandatory responsibilities to fulfil on behalf of those who are still incarcerated. According to the code of the underworld, however, they are required to maintain their pious lifestyle in the free world and will lose their protective status should they return to prison for a crime committed since finding God.

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<sup>47</sup> Psalm 28:7 in the King James Bible reads: The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.

Consequently, religious groups are the only type of prisoner solidarity organization that I am currently aware of that will not, because they cannot, evolve in terms of criminal activity, though they can, in theory, increase their market share of protection within the prison protection market. Moreover, religious groups are not limited to an existence within the prison as they have clear associations with religious groups in the free world and may well continue their proselytizing in an effort to further their members' redemption upon their release. In this regard, they are a counterpoint to the prison gangs both within prison and in the free world, as their mission is directly opposed to that of prison gangs. It is a position that they enjoy largely without being under direct threat from prison gangs because of the ultimate protection they claim: that from eternal damnation.

### **Prison Gangs or Prison States?**

The final stage of the Buentello et al. organisational trajectory is the presence of a full-fledged prison gang, which is an organization that affects both prison life and the underworld of the free world. Such organizations have historically filled the void that is left by the prison administration's refusal or inability to enforce its authority and control throughout prison life, as it once did in Texas (Dilulio 1990). Nonetheless, if we are to understand how a "prison gang" affects both realms, then what we are seeing with the rise of the Tangos are organizations that cannot truly be deemed prison gangs, in spite of their being labelled as such by law enforcement officials (Texas Department of Public Safety 2015, 2014, 2013). Most prisoners recognize this distinction. They refer to organizations such as the Eme, TS, and Barrio Azteca as "families" and purposefully exclude the Tangos from that status, particularly when discussing the organizations and their role on the street. Moreover, the distinction implies (correctly at the time of writing) that the Tangos do not participate in running protection markets in the free world. While this involvement may change, allowing Tangos to exist could be a viable control solution for the prison administration should it decide, as it has in the past, that it cannot affect sufficient control within the prison walls (Parenti 2000).

Prison gangs within a prison unit parallel states in an "anarchical world" (Bull 2002, Wendt 1992). Like states that have sovereignty over their territory and the citizens within that territory, prison gangs assert authority and control over their members. Moreover, like unions that negotiate better outcomes for their members, prison gangs, as organizations, negotiate problems for their members. Plus, an individual's association with a state, like an inmate's association with the political

structure within a prison, is not optional, lest a person be uniquely powerful or willing to live in the margins with reduced rights.

However, unlike the anarchical space in which states exist, the parameters which govern prison life can be recalibrated. Prison is, after all, a product of the state and is, in theory, under the state's control. The experience in Texas has shown that it is possible to affect prison politics by implementing a change in prison policy. What remains uncertain, however, is the collateral damage of any given control policy that fails to maintain order by asserting a monopoly over the protection market. Achieving such a monopoly is not a straightforward task for the prison administration, particularly in light of the need to treat prisoners justly. Solitary confinement, which would be an absolute manifestation of such a monopoly, would also be patently inhumane. Nonetheless, historical observations provide worthy lessons. From the early 1960s onward when prisons in California and elsewhere became overcrowded, prisoner solidarity groups formed (Irwin 1980). Control can be more easily asserted by a prison administration over a smaller space or a smaller group of people (Skarbek 2012, Tapia 2014, Burman 2012).

Yet, when the authorities lose control over the social order of prison, then prison gangs assume the role of the state within prison, given that they engage in governance – by providing not only protection but also services to their members – and exercise a form of sovereignty over their members and *vis-à-vis* the other prison gangs while operating within the confines of prison. Vertically organized prison gangs are the pinnacle of criminal collective action within the prison system, in part because they are able to influence not only prison but also street politics. The authority and control that the hierarchical prison gangs exercise do not stop at the walls of the prison yard; their reach extends to the street so that they influence how business is handled by their associates in the free world. It is the reason why Barrio Azteca, even while handicapped by the TDC for several years now within the prison walls, is still a central force within the street drug market of El Paso.



## SIX: A KIND OF HUSH IN EL PASO

### *NOBODY'S POSTING UP*

The day after the billboard news broke, I was back in the red pickup, driving through Chuco with an *equis* named Emiliano. A former Barrio Azteca soldier, he had decided that the gang life was no longer for him. He had children now and was no longer interested in slinging drugs to make ends meet. He agreed to show me the old haunts where the action used to be in El Paso. Everyone, from journalists, to gang members, to my neighbours, and current and former police, described a time when El Paso was far less peaceful – though never anywhere as violent as Ciudad Juárez. For now, El Paso, by and large, seemed to live up to its peaceful reputation; there were rarely news reports of violence, much less gang or drug related incidents.

“[From the late ‘50s] to the late ‘80s or ‘90s, we had a lot of different gangs throughout the city, a lot of membership; but they were more focused and not so much into profiteering, selling drugs, prostitution, and things of that nature. Most of them were copycatting and they just went around the city and graffitied their areas,” explained Harry Kirk, a retired El Paso police officer who worked on gangs in the ‘80s and ‘90s. By the end of that time period, there was “a proliferation of drive-by shootings and retaliation type things or events such as crossing out our graffiti in our area and things like that.”

Several people who had been involved in gangs in the 1980s described how much their scene changed in that decade alone. Miguel, who had done over twenty years in prison for murdering a rival gang member when he was a teenager, talked about the Nasty Boys, the group he associated with as a youth. At first, it was a “party crew,” made up of a hundred or so kids whose primary goal was to go out to party and dance. They drank underage and smoked marijuana, but they were hardly up to anything that could be considered more than usual teenage mischief. Eventually that changed; violence came into the picture, and the group needed to protect itself from others who attempted to disrupt their parties violently.

Miguel described the initial stages of the group’s transformation from a party crew into a street gang: “[We had] seen that other party crews wanted to jump so-and-so at a party or at a club. And we [had] seen a lot of – this was ‘83, ‘84, and ‘85 – that’s when I saw a bunch of guns, stabbings, [and] fights of course.”

“Why would somebody want to jump [beat up] somebody [in your crew]?” I asked.

“I think it’s just the jealousy,” Miguel responded. “I even got to know many other people from other gangs. And they were like [...], ‘We don’t know why we started shit with you all. [...] I guess it’s because you guys had more girls in your crew.’ I guess it’s just a jealousy issue. [... So, for protection,] along with my brother, we started carrying guns.”

“Why did you decide to get weapons?”

“Because all of the other gangs started getting weapons or guns and they wanted to shoot at us. We did have a lot of circumstances where they would shoot at us at parties or at get-togethers or even when we were just chilling at the apartments or whatever. They would just go and do a drive-by. [...] Back in ‘87, they killed one of my homies. Then out of the hundred that were with the Nasty Boys, about twenty-five of us, we just went berserk or something. [...] Out of the twenty-five, I think like maybe twenty of us went to prison. Murders, attempted murders, aggravated assault, attempted murders of police officers.”

In the impoverished parts of town, street gangs also ran, with a goal to “protect” their blocks. Pancho recounted his youth as a member of the Diablos street gang. When his housing project was torn down, he was forced to relocate into unfriendly territory: “[N]obody liked us. Every one or two blocks in Segundo<sup>48</sup>, it used to be a different gang and nobody liked us. [...] Every day [when] I went to school and everything, it was an adventure.”

Eventually, Pancho started getting into more serious activities with the Diablos: “[We would] steal, you know? Do different things, go to other ‘hoods just to fight, to represent, to let them know we were there.”

Charlie, a current EPPD sergeant, who started in the early ‘90s, noted how different the gang scene was then compared to the mid-2010s: “When I first got here, we were mostly dealing with turf issues between street gangs. Most of the problems that we saw back then was, again, issues on turf, issues of disrespect where they were

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<sup>48</sup> *Segundo Barrio*, the second ward of El Paso, located next to the border with Juárez, is historically a low income area.

disrespecting each other – hand signs, mad-dogging<sup>49</sup> – that’s what was sparking off a lot of the gang [violence].”

Today, however, significant violence in El Paso is a thing of the past. Everyone I spoke to had a different idea as to why El Paso had become peaceful. Harry and Charlie credited the efforts of the police department, especially community policing and community outreach programs. My housemate Pablo speculated that it was due to the influx of soldiers at Fort Bliss as a result of the U.S.’s involvement in foreign wars. Bruce, an *esquina* for Barrio Azteca, claimed that Barrio Azteca, in controlling the politics of the streets, insured their members did not draw police attention to themselves. Whatever the cause, the streets of El Paso were mostly devoid of obvious delinquent activity.

As I cruised around with Emiliano, we looked for anything that could be possibly gang related. To my untrained eye, I had no idea what to look for, so I was hoping that Emiliano could point some action out to me. Our first stop was Emiliano’s childhood neighbourhood, Sandoval. Here were the same tenement houses that José had grown up in some thirty years before. Today, the blue housing projects appeared a tranquil working class apartment complex.

“That’s the first spot I did a drive-by. I was ten,” Emiliano told me, as we passed a rundown house near the projects. Today little, if any, violence remains that characterized his childhood days, running with the local street gang, Puro Barrio Sandoval.

“It ain’t the same as it used to be when I was with [Puro Barrio Sandoval]. You don’t see all the people hanging around the corners like we used to. Or at the park. [... It’s not like] in the early ‘90s, [with] all these different gangs doing drive-bys. You don’t hear that no more.”

The lack of violence in El Paso remained a running theme during our drive through the city. We passed all of the old hot spots. After visiting the west side, we went downtown, where a lot of the drug dealing used to happen. Today, it was mostly empty and under re-construction. On the back end of the main downtown area, Segundo Barrio, which once had a rough reputation, was quiet, too. The real estate next to the brand-new baseball stadium, home of the El Paso Chihuahuas, was being sold

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<sup>49</sup> Mad-dogging is staring down another person in a menacing way as if to attempt to trigger a conflict.

with willing buyers snatching up the properties to redevelop them. Central appeared to be a middleclass residential area of El Paso. The east side of town, where empty fields used to be, now offered new shopping malls. Throughout our drive, we saw only one woman who was staggering down the street, probably high on something.

“Wow. *Nobody* is posting up; I can’t believe it,” Emiliano observed. The corners, parks, and streets were devoid of the gang culture of old – the one that Emiliano remembered, characterized by gang members loitering and gang tags adorning the walls of such spaces. That life just didn’t exist publicly anymore, anywhere in El Paso, except for possibly a few bars that Emiliano was unwilling to check out, perhaps due to his *equis* status.

Even so, empty streets didn’t necessarily mean that there wasn’t any illicit activity in El Paso. More likely, people who do that activity prefer to avoid the public eye. The EPPD sergeant who runs the Stash House Unit<sup>50</sup> said that El Paso is still a place where a lot of product is stored for further transportation. Stash houses for northbound drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, as well as southbound currency, are scattered throughout the city. Before the violence escalated in Juárez, the stash houses held multi-kilo quantities, but the stash house unit was reasonably successful in finding these properties. “Because of that, [drug traffickers] started changing their strategy,” Charlie explained. “They stopped keeping all their eggs in the same basket.” Today, they hold smaller quantities, to protect against loss, but outside of that, there does not seem to be a predictable pattern to the houses. They have been found throughout the city and they “can seem almost abandoned to having a family living inside.”

When a stash house bust does happen, there is rarely violence. After all, the traffickers don’t want their neighbours to live on edge, since the people of El Paso are more likely to report suspicious activities than the people of Juárez. That does not mean that there aren’t any killings anymore, Emiliano warned, echoing what Pancho had told me about things happening under water.

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<sup>50</sup> The Stash House Unit is an initiative that started in 1989 by the El Paso HIDTA with the goal to disrupt wholesale drug traffickers’ distribution networks by identifying the places where they store large quantities of drugs which are to be transported for sale in other parts of the U.S.

“You don’t hear about [killings], but it’s happening. You got to be a part of it – be a part of the streets or something [so] that you can hear what’s really going on on the streets. [... For example, the authorities] found two bodies and one of them was an Azteca,” Emiliano recounted. “The other guy was a white dude. I don’t know what he was doing. He [had] been in prison himself. So I don’t know the thing what was going on; but I know, because [Ismael] used to sell for me when I was over on the west side. He used to sell heroin for me. So I don’t know what he did or didn’t do, but they found him dead. But they never did too much about it like reporting it on the news every day when he got identified or none of that. They just said they found two bodies and that’s it. You never heard about it again.”

That being said, in the six years that Emiliano had been out of prison, he had heard of approximately six men who were affiliated with the gangs who had been murdered. According to Emiliano, people who are affiliated with the drug trafficking organizations in El Paso, prefer to keep their affiliations quiet: “Right here [in El Paso], it’s like [cartel members] just want to be family people. They want to be with their families and stuff. They don’t want to call attention to themselves or anything like that.”

An editor for the *El Paso Times* corroborated Emiliano’s claim, telling me that the paper has run stories on “cartel members on this side of the border, but they don’t do anything in El Paso.” In short, if a territorial claim is to be made for El Paso, Barrio Azteca is the only group that claims it.

### *THE STREET GANGS OF EL PASO*

The majority of the Hispanic gang members I spoke to had two gang-related identities: one of the street and one of prison. One of the two identities trumped the other. Those who joined Barrio Azteca were Aztecas for life (or *equis*). Those who were part of Chuco Tango identified with whichever gang they did before going to prison. The distinction is not incidental; the roles and allegiances forged in the context of the street are different from those forged in prison. Pancho contrasted the responsibilities and relationship between his being a member of the Diablos, a street gang, and his being a member of Barrio Azteca, a prison gang.

As a member of a street gang, you have “to take care of an area, to take care of your ‘hood. It’s just like a friendship, binding together, bonding together,” Pancho explained. “But a family inside the prison is forever. You cannot turn your back on that or you cannot get out of it, you cannot leave. If you’re going to go somewhere to work

or something, you need to let them know where you're going to be so they can let you know if there's homeboys around that area where you can just clique together."

There is a difference in status, too, between being identified primarily as a member of a *family* – a prison gang – or being identified primarily as a member of a street gang. Once someone becomes an Azteca, he has more clout on the streets of El Paso. He shoots up the hierarchy of his street gang's control structure. By allowing for dual identities to exist in a clear hierarchy, Barrio Azteca was able to unify several street gangs under its overarching political structure, which was one of the factors that reduced violent conflict among street gangs. In terms of prison gangs, there was no competition in El Paso for the better part of 20 years, meaning that the structure the Aztecas imposed was accepted without much opposition. Consequently, turf wars are not allowed to take place, since conflict brings unwanted law enforcement attention. Accordingly, several street gangs have become part of an enterprise that has focused on moving drugs. The street gangs have accepted the rules given to them by their Azteca bosses in accordance with those business interests.

Moreover, the few established gangs that remain active prevent emerging groups from becoming anything more than a party crew. Frank, who is a member of an established Juárez-based gang, said that when party crews end and most of those kids leave the area to go to college or to work, the remaining members are forcibly incorporated into his gang.

"Some of the youngsters from our gang, they recruit those guys [from party crews]," Frank explained. "They tell them, 'You're not going to be with this party crew anymore. You're going to be with us, all of you guys.' And [the youngsters in my gang] go and fuck them up and make sure that they stop with that party crew bullshit."

Most of the men I spoke to who had joined street gangs joined after hanging out with existing gang members for a protracted period of time. Their accounts were similar, always tales of seeking acceptance or the love that they felt they were missing at home as children. In every instance, the men who had joined street gangs were from poor backgrounds and had parents who were absent either because they were working multiple jobs to make ends meet, they were on drugs, or they were just gone.

Without a parent – or any other authority figure – to guide them, these kids began to hang out with other kids who provided the acceptance they craved. They would party with them and hang out with them, until the kids who were already part of the gang would say that hanging out time was over: it was time to get jumped in.

“I was nine years old, that’s when I got jumped into my gang,” Pancho said. “At that time I was a follower. I was a little boy looking up to older guys. I just liked the situation, the relationship everybody had.”

Joey was jumped in middle school, just for hanging around the gang too much: “I didn’t want to get into that gang, I just wanted to kick it and then, yeah, we started messing up, started hanging around, started robbing stereos, started robbing [...] Walmart, just jacking Disney movies to get money and then yeah I started messing up,” Joey recounted. “And, then I got jumped into the ‘hood eventually, because they said, ‘No, you’re kicking it [with us] too much,’ or whatever, I got put in the gang [...]. I didn’t want to, but I got jumped in.”

My housemate, Pablo, a man who left gang life completely behind him by joining the military, recounted how he got jumped in during his sophomore year in high school: “It was kind of one of those things where I lived in this apartment building and there were some people there who were all part of this gang. I ended up spending a lot of time with them and hanging out with them. One day it was just time to jump me in. Four guys came up on me and beat the crap out of me and I was in. They put me in the hospital.”

As a member of a street gang, it is easier to fade away from *la vida loca*, the crazy life. The obligations to the gang are not typically as hard and fast compared to what prison gang members face. Some street gang members, like Pablo, move away or move on with their lives, finding interests outside the delinquent behaviours of their childhood. For others, like Pancho and Frank, the street gangs serve as a springboard into prison as their criminal activities become more and more serious. Once a person spends time in a prison that is medium security or higher, he becomes part of prison politics, whether he wants to or not.

#### *PRISON POLITICS ON THE STREET*

“What happens is that you have your street gang members. They get arrested for a violent crime or for narcotics. They can’t make bond because, obviously, it was something pretty serious that they did. So they end up at the El Paso County jail,” Charlie, the gang sergeant, explained. “At the El Paso County jail, depending on how long you’re there, you’ll stay at the downtown facility or get transferred to the jail annex. If you’re going to be incarcerated for a certain period of time and you’re a State jail inmate with State charges, you’re most likely going to end up at the annex. For protection from other gangs that are there, I would say there’s a very high percentage –

probably in the 90s – that those people are going to join one gang or another for protection.

“But this is where Barrio Azteca starts their recruitment, in that they want people that are going to be loyal to the gang. They’re going to want people that will strike for the gang at any given time, even kill for the gang. A lot of times, a lot of these street gang members, they already know what they can do. They’ve pretty much already proven themselves; and by just getting to the jail, that’s where the recruiting process starts.”

That is just the beginning of a process that ultimately returns to the street.

“When folks come out of jail, they are completely changed, though not necessarily reformed. It is a system that runs on money and doesn’t pause to think about the monster it feeds,” Scoperto said. “When people go to jail, their new connections lead them to taking risks they never imagined taking [once they leave].” On the outside, the status gained from being in prison is one that demands respect within the underworld.

### **Asserting Respect**

The concept of respect is fundamental to members of a gang. Respect, at its core, indicates an understanding and reverence for the rules and social stations within the structure of the underworld. Minding one’s own business is the key to respect at the most basic level. One should not try to engage above one’s own station.

“Out here, when you talk to a person, you make eye contact, right?” Pablo explained. “In there [in prison], you cannot make a lot of eye contact with a person. You need to mind your own business.”

Much like the military, the respect one commands in a gang is dependent on his status within the organization: “[In a gang,] the lower ranking you are, the less you have to say about anything. [...] You get respect in a gang by being consistent, that you’re always there, that you’re always down to throw down and whatever needs to be done to keep people safe or whatever,” said Pablo, who had spent several years in the U.S. Armed Forces. “In the military, the same thing. If you go in there and you work hard and you do your job well, you get respect for it.”

Accordingly, respect is synonymous with power: “I was tempted [to join Barrio Azteca], to try to get a little bit of respect, more respect, I mean, to feel more powerful,” explained Alonzo, a man convicted of human smuggling but who did not join a gang. “I would hang around with [the Aztecas ...], but those guys, usually, that you



meet [in prison] that are in gangs, they don't care, they're not in a hurry to come out. If they have to stab somebody, they'll stab him. They'll get more time, but they don't care."

Critically, respect is earned and not given for nothing. Traditionally, one gives respect by understanding the rules of the underworld and abiding by them. One earns respect by "putting in work," such as stabbing someone, or engaging in other high-risk behaviour within the prison. Putting in work is the traditional way one can rise up through the ranks. As one improves one's station, respect changes. Ian, who called shots for the Aryan Brotherhood in his prison unit, defined respect at the highest level as "knowing you can go whip somebody's ass and ain't nobody can do anything about it. People deferring to you. People asking your permission to do something. Being able to put out a hit. That's a respect power thing."

Being able to return to the free world and to control the street – that is, demanding respect – are part of what make a prison gang influential in the underground economy. From a market viewpoint, it is in a prison gang's best interest to engage in a *realpolitik* of the street, in which it attempts to minimize the number of competitive organizations not only within the city or cities it operates but also within the prison system as a whole. Eliminating competing enterprises and emerging groups, which could one day turn into potential competitors, results in the theoretical maximization of earning potential. When such competitions have occurred in the southwest, they have involved almost exclusively groups whose members were predominately the same race (Skarbek 2011, 2014).

The politics of prison, and by extension the county jail, are partly responsible for this phenomenon. When Barrio Azteca dominated the county jail, rival gang members needed to be careful not to fall into their bad graces. Should rivals find themselves incarcerated, they are subjected to the scrutiny of the people who are already inside. However, given the racial divide within prison and the *de facto* segregation that continues, it is unlikely that members of different race-based prison groups will be placed together in lock-up, thus removing some of the threat of retaliation across races (Skarbek 2014). Now that Barrio Azteca no longer has a monopoly in county, Hispanic gang members who are opposed to them fear retaliation less, even if it means they have to suffer a beating initially. For example, Frank said that he would refuse to follow the Barrio Azteca's orders when he would get locked up in

county. “They would kick my ass right there, and I would ship myself out of that tank to another one where it was more Chuco Tango.”

The lack of street-level, inter-racial violent conflict in El Paso can be explained, in part, by Barrio Azteca’s continued market dominance over the retail drug market. By most accounts from users and gang members alike, despite its waning influence in the prison system, Barrio Azteca continues to dominate control over this market. Historically, the Aztecas have forced other gangs to pay *cuota*, or a tax, for the right to sell drugs unmolested within most of El Paso, Barrio Azteca’s stronghold in Texas (Texas Department of Public Safety 2015).

Cara, a woman originally from Appalachia and a recovering heroin user, distinctly remembered and feared Barrio Azteca’s guarantee of violence. Though she felt safe from them because she was a good customer, Cara knew a woman who had been threatened.

“I started living with a girl that was a drug dealer,” Cara said. “She wasn’t an Azteca, but her husband was Texas Syndicate. She was selling up here [in El Paso]. She had an apartment on Oregon Street and she was selling heroin; and she would go across the bridge each day and get her heroin, but she was paying the Aztecas what they call a *cuota*. Apparently, she was behind on her *cuota*, so they sent this man here.

“I knew the man. I knew him very well. He was what I considered a friend of mine. And he told her, ‘Look, [Carmen], they sent me down here to tell you that if you don’t pay this, you know what’s coming. They said you’re not going to sell it in their territory and them not profit from it. You’re not going to make profit from their territory. This is their territory. They’re allowing you to make a little money so you can get by, but you’re basically taking money out of their hands. So they’re pissed [off].”

Cara used to accompany Carmen to the bridge to Juárez to go score crack, Carmen’s drug of choice. They would cross the bridge to Juárez where the drugs were cheaper and come back. One day, Cara’s friend, the Azteca member, pulled her aside and said: “[Cara], I’m telling you, *do not* go to the bridge with [Carmen] tonight. Do not go to the bridge with her because if she hasn’t paid that money by then, they’re going to be waiting on her. They know exactly the way she goes. They’re going to kill her; and when they kill her, they’re not going to leave a witness. If you’re there, you’re dead too. They don’t care who you are. They don’t care. They’re not from here. They ain’t going to have to worry about the consequences from here. They’re not worried about it. It’s just going to be as easy as that. You’re just going to be another nobody.”

### A Respect Deficit

Given the recent difficulties Barrio Azteca faced in recruiting and replenishing its ranks within prison, some members of non-Azteca allied gangs reported their ability to refuse to pay *cuota*, without facing any real consequences; the need to respect Barrio Azteca's authority on the street had declined. To that end, some Barrio Azteca members have noted that the gang has started to recruit directly from street gangs, allowing individuals to join without the traditional vetting processes and without putting in work. The biggest complaint that *equis* members make is the deterioration of the *carnalismo* or brotherhood which initially enticed them to join.

Prospects are no longer required to go to county jail or prison before being allowed to join. New members are being blessed into Barrio Azteca while they are still on the street. They do not have to put in work. Respect is gained and accorded to them via their organizational association. Older members, who went through the traditional process, lack trust in these newer members who are often blamed for making rash decisions that undermine the overall wellbeing of the organization. Such members also lack the respect of their enemy peers, who feel they have not *earned* the respect they demand. In addition, when established leaders are incarcerated, these youngsters are the ones left to assume leadership positions in the gang, even though they lack the connections, trust, and respect to continue operating the gang in the same manner as their predecessors.

"Back in the day the gang was all about *carnalismo*," Scoperto lamented. "Being an Azteca was about respect and educating people so they knew what they were getting themselves into. Now it's all rumours and obstruction; nobody is straight up. The youngsters have started to falsify everything. They don't know shit. [...] There is a lot of show and poor management. The guys who are all tatted up aren't the hardest. When you've done something serious, you're going to be segregated. Those guys won't have tattoos because they don't have the opportunity to get tagged. It used to be that if someone screwed up, everyone dealt with the consequences together, unless you did something you weren't supposed to do, that wasn't spoken for [approved by the gang's higher ups], then you got punished personally. People aren't standing up for their brothers anymore."

In addition, there seems to be a significant difference in the way that the El Paso side of the gang is overseen compared to the Juárez side, a difference that Scoperto attributes to the higher stakes on life and death in Juárez's violent environment: "In Juárez, the Aztecas are different, in part because they are dealing with

a life that has serious consequences by comparison. Over there, they go to war to kill and not to let the others on your side die. It's serious. But with the power that came from the war is the negative. They just became assassins, which is bad. Before, gangs used to talk to each other. But not anymore. Violence is now what you have to do in Juárez if you are to survive."

The need to stay sharp and to back-up one's *compadres* leads to strict anti-drug policies in Juárez, given that the gang members are tempted to use the products they sling on the street. "Over [in Juárez], you can't be strung out on heroin," Emiliano explained. "[The gang will] give you a couple of chances. They even put you in rehab centres so you can clean yourself and stuff. If you don't listen, then it's a different story. But over there, it's like being in prison because they're taking care of each other. They don't want to see you struggling or all raggedy or all hooked up on heroin. They don't like to see that. So they do it themselves and put you in a rehab centre and stuff to help you out. Over here, it's nothing like that."

"In Juárez, [Barrio Azteca] give [drug using gang members] two opportunities to go through a drug program," Charlie, the gang sergeant told me. "If they fail to succeed after the second time, [the Aztecas] kill them. They just do away with [drug users] because they want their members to be sharp." The same cannot be said in El Paso, where many Azteca gang members use heroin, thus creating an air of weakness that leads to disrespect in the underground.

The change in the way respect is conceptualized among the members of the underworld is an indication of the changing dynamics of the protection racket in the same space. Shifts in the respect paradigms indicate that previously dominant groups no longer hold the hegemonic status required to back up their authority with effective control. Nonetheless, the violence that occurred with the market liberalization of protection rackets in Mexico was not replicated in the streets of El Paso, partly because gang members understand that they face more scrutiny from American law enforcement, which results in an increased likelihood of being caught.

Gang members' perception that they will be caught by law enforcement squares directly with Gary Becker's (1968) thesis that the best deterrence against crime is the threat of capture. The perception of capture and punishment in the free world also explains why, despite market competition within the free world, there is little free world violence that manifests publicly. Instead, the violent contestation of the protection racket market is more likely to happen in prison; however, the prison

administration has been able to curb that threat by segregating known gang members, thus allowing the Tangos to grow. Nonetheless, Chuco Tango does not appear to have a significant market share with street dealing; its members do not operate as a unit – yet. So, even though weakened in prison, Barrio Azteca remained the most common – though by no means the only – wholesale and street suppliers of powder cocaine and black tar heroin to El Paso’s drug users during the time that I visited.

#### *THE DRUG TRADE AT THE BORDER*

In El Paso, one is never too far away from somebody who is involved in the drug trade. Across the street from my house in Sunset Heights was a duplex owned by a woman who was always wacked out of her head, high on God knows what. Big snarling dogs guarded the yard. In an inconspicuous apartment in the rear of the property lived a drug dealer. I never saw him in all the time that I was there, but everyone knew about him. It was an open secret in the neighbourhood. And, as long as he didn’t cause any trouble, nobody really cared. Random, usually beat-up, cars would pull up from time to time and sometimes park next to my house. Their drivers or passengers would quickly cross the street and disappear into the back of the duplex. A few minutes later, they would re-emerge with their bounty in fist, get back into their jalopies, and drive off. Dealing in El Paso typically involves customers coming to a set location, out of the public view.

El Paso is divided into several different markets, where various gangs, and some independent sellers, hawk different products based on the comparative advantage of their access to products. The far north-eastern part of the city features the white boys, selling the little bit of meth that was sold in El Paso, mostly to other white people. They claim that their meth came from small batches of domestically produced product and not from the Mexican DTOs. Most users in El Paso appear prefer coke and heroin to meth, so it’s possible that the meth sold there is a local product, while the Mexican large-batch meth is shipped further afield, for use in rural America where its demand is high.

Southwest of Fort Bliss is the Devil’s Triangle, an area where Bradley’s gang, the GDs, sell crack cocaine. The market they serve is also small. They get their product from a “plug,” someone who has a connection with one of the Mexican DTOs. Rarely does anyone in Bradley’s gang come into contact with anybody who is a full-fledged member of a Mexican DTO. The lack of connections that non-Latino gang members have within the drug world curtails their ability to go into business for themselves and

increases the cost of their supply. Because the GDs process powder cocaine into crack, something the Hispanic dealers generally don't bother with in El Paso, non-Latinos are able to make enough mark-up to stay in business.

The remaining street drug markets are interspersed throughout the rest of the town and are primarily run by Barrio Azteca gang members who specialize in selling cocaine and heroin. Of course, marijuana is available, but it is so commonly available that the Aztecas don't even bother taxing the dealers. The real money is not in the retail sale that the street offers, but the wholesale, transnational opportunities that being on the border provide.

### Getting Connected

"It's mostly the gangs – the prison gangs – that run the [drug trade in American] border towns," Emiliano explained. "Once you go up [to Mexico], you [as a gang member] don't have no authority to go and claim [respect]. It's like, over there the gangs – like if it's me and you and you're a gang member from the streets and I [as a cartel guy] got all kind of drugs; I got guns; I got everything; and I tell you, 'You want to work for me? I'll pay you this.' You're going to see the money and all the drugs and guns; and you're going to say, 'Yeah.'"

"So I'm going to tell you, 'Okay, you start getting people to start selling for you and it's only going to be me and you – you're going to come to me. Don't bring nobody else. As soon as you get people, come and ask me what you need and I'll give it to you; but never introduce me to nobody.' You know what I mean? You're going to be like the shot caller, but I'm the one taking care of everything. You're going to report to me, but everybody's going to report to you."

This was the arrangement that Charlie was familiar with from the law enforcement perspective: "Prior to 2008, we had Barrio Azteca moving kilos of cocaine out of here. It wasn't the whole gang. It was just certain members who'd gotten to having the right people at the right place, having the source available for the narcotics. So they were moving multi-kilo and multi-ton quantities of marijuana and multi-kilo quantities of cocaine out of the El Paso area. Once the war started, that changed. We started seeing a lot lesser volumes of narcotics coming to El Paso in a given time. They didn't want their narcotics all popped at one time. They started reducing the quantity coming over, stockpiling it here, and then moving it out."

The El Paso and Juárez branches of the Aztecas might have slightly different reputations on the street, but they cooperate in trans-border affairs. The two sides of

the gang have distinct leadership, with two bosses in charge of each side, who have different styles which square with the different political realities of the two cities. “It’s the same gang,” Emiliano frankly said. The Aztecas of both cities work together to coordinate drug shipments, kidnappings, intimidation, and back up, if necessary, for particular operations: “Once the war [between the Juárez and Sinaloa Cartels] started, everybody was on standby,” Pancho explained. “You have to be there for your family.”

The war negatively affected the street trade as well as the wholesale trafficking undertaken by the gang. According to both police and gang members, the availability of quality product to serve local users declined because those who were in charge of transporting the wholesale loads were more interested in moving the product deeper into the United States where they could get better prices compared to offloading it in El Paso.

“Right here [in El Paso], they just leave the little scraps,” Pancho said. “If they bring in like fifty keys, they just leave like two here, just to supply the people right here and that’s it. Usually everything goes up.”

According to Charlie, the pattern of supply in El Paso is dependent on the connections that the regional boss has: “It depends who’s in power and who happens to be the leader at the time. If it’s somebody who’s got the access to out of town, they themselves are moving ounce or kilo quantities of heroin out of here or multi-pound quantities of marijuana out of here. If whoever’s in power doesn’t have that, then they’re mostly doing local distribution for your local users.”

Not being part of the Aztecas, however, does not necessarily preclude a person from being a drug dealer at the street or wholesale level. Frank, for example, as a member of a Juárez-based gang, can ask members of his gang in Mexico to supply him. Gang membership is a helpful but not a necessary way to get a plug; it is possible for non-gang members, like Armando, a middle-class man from El Paso, to get in on the action, too, though such relationships are probably atypical. I met Armando through my housemate Pablo. Armando had gone to prison for dealing drugs. In prison, he was with Chuco Tango, but he was never involved with the street gangs. Being a *cholo* wasn’t his scene. He grew up in a middle-class family and was drawn to dealing drugs because of the money he could make. He knew that he could buy wholesale, break down the product into individual portions, and double or triple his money.

“Somebody gave me a pound [of marijuana], and I broke it down, starting getting that money, and I loved the power, I loved the money I was getting.” Armando told me. “I ended up moving to cocaine and more pounds.”

For Armando, luck played a large part in his initial ability to get wholesale amounts: “This guy just landed on my lap. I wasn’t expecting that connect. I knew people from the barrio that I grew up in, Calavera, but I used to go in there and, ‘Hey I need this; I need that.’ They would give me the small amounts that I was wanting. I started dealing in big amounts with this man that landed on my lap. And it lasted for about a year.”

Being in that community, Armando found it easy to replace his drug connect. He knew who he had to approach and he had personal history, and the social capital, required to be in the same places where those people would be. Armando managed to avoid trouble, in part, because he had friends who were part of the gangs, but also because he operated in a market that did not overlap with the gang’s, thus bringing less attention to himself. He was operating in the margins of the drug trade. For the majority of his fifteen years of selling, he managed to avoid police scrutiny and gang threats, thereby making money hand over fist.

### **Adding Value**

To understand the money in play, one needs to understand where value is added to the product. One night at the Tap, an iconic bar in downtown El Paso, a group of three men from the oil fields of west Texas were out celebrating their buddy’s last night of freedom before he was to face trial for moving dope. One of them, Guillermo, a man who had spent time in prison on the other side of the state for trafficking drugs, explained the mark-up to me as we shared a pitcher of beer.

“When you get a kilo of coke, it comes packaged tight like a golf ball and it’s wrapped up in a banana leaf. The cartel gets you started. The first time you buy one key, and you get another. It’s about 15, 16 thousand dollars if you get it over in Mexico. Then you have to ship it over. It’s not a big deal. We train our own dogs to test the methods.

“Then once you’ve got in north, you cut it. You know the best thing to cut it with? No, not baking soda. The best thing to cut it with is baby teething aspirin. It creates an effect that makes people think that it’s pure. It numbs the gums. For the



people who spark<sup>51</sup> it, it doesn't take too much away from the high. If you slam<sup>52</sup> it, it cooks up clean; no residue. Once it's cut, then you turn your money over quickly. You make five times your investment back.

"With that life, you can have what you want: cars; drugs; pussy. The trick is not screwing up. It's scary, man. I have had guns pointed to my head while I pointed guns at other people who thought I was cheating them. The cartel gave me cut product and I called them on it, but they wanted the price for a pure brick. I got busted because I made bad decisions when I was high. But I was honest and I lived. That's all in my past, though; now, I push concrete."

What Guillermo described was an operation that sought to maximize potential profit margin by engaging in two high-risk, high-reward activities that increase profit potential. First, there is value added to smuggling the contraband across the border. The 15 to 16-thousand-dollar price he stated for a kilo of "pure" cocaine, which would be expected to be 85 percent cocaine or better, was consistent with what I had heard reported from other dealers I interviewed, though some claimed that, with the right connections or bulk purchases, better prices could be had. In El Paso, the same kilo could be moved for somewhere between 22 to 25 thousand dollars, meaning that an initial mark-up would be a minimum of six thousand dollars for a single kilo of cocaine. This price increases again once drugs are smuggled through the internal CBP checkpoints, which are stationed within 100 miles, as the crow flies, on all roads that come from a border crossing. Crossing these checkpoints is less risky, but can represent an additional two-thousand-dollar increase in value added to a single kilo of cocaine.

Second, there is the street selling of the product. The raw product can be cut with an adulterant. Guillermo used aspirin, but a large array of other substances, including benzocaine and lidocaine, are commonly used (Carter, Brewer, and Angel 2000). In addition, the product can be turned into crack cocaine, a preparation cooked with baking soda into smokable rocks, thus augmenting its volume. These adulterated products can be sold at volume, again with a mark-up, to a trafficker who will move the product to another market, to a distributor who may then supply a street level dealer

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<sup>51</sup> Smoke

<sup>52</sup> Inject

locally, or directly to individual street-level clients. Each smaller quantity is relatively more expensive than the original larger one, mirroring the licit retail market.

### **Business at the Border**

The process of procuring drugs as described by Guillermo dispels the idea that DTOs are vertically organized organizations that have reach from the plantation to the street (Campbell 2009). Historically, a vertical organization that encompasses producer to street retailer has rarely existed. Accordingly, three types of organizations that are participating in the drug trade can be identified. Drawing from the language of the licit world, we have DTOs acting as firms; prison gangs acting as subcontractors; and, private citizens acting as small businessmen.

The firms' primary businesses include producing product, transporting it, wholesaling it, and, fundamentally, protecting their interests. Accordingly, the firms' reach does not extend beyond those activities, because doing so would subject them to irrational risks. Thus, one should think of the true cartel operatives as members of a reasonably small but powerful firm, which, after establishing functioning protection rackets, coordinates the logistics of achieving its business goals. The DTO only undertakes tasks that are the most profitable or that it cannot entrust to anyone else, such as wholesale air shipment or providing protection.

This strategy was not unique to Mexican DTOs; they copied it from the Colombian DTOs who they supplanted as America's primary drug suppliers when America's "war on drugs" cracked down on the Caribbean-based drug routes in the 1970s (Cook 2007, Beittel 2009, Finckenaue, Fuentes, and Ward 2007, Wainwright 2016). The Mexican organizations improved upon the Colombians' strategy by diversifying the products offered and by minimizing their risks (Celaya Pacheco 2009). When the risk of holding a product and continuing to protect it exceeds the opportunity to capitalize on the product by shifting it, the Mexican organizations offload the product to intermediaries.

DTOs thus manage business interests and use an array of other actors to achieve goals without direct involvement on their part. This practice is evident in the use of gangs to enforce the lower echelons of the protection racket. Although Barrio Azteca is clearly associated with La Linea and, by extension, the Juárez Cartel, it is not correct to conflate them as one and the same organization. Gangs act as subcontractors, who provide particular services that are of interest to the firm that contracts their services.

The relationship between firm and subcontractor is forged between leaders in both organizations. The majority of the subcontractor's staff never meets anyone in the firm; they take orders from their boss, who is, in theory, operating in accordance to the wishes of the firm. Failure to promote the firm's vision can result in the subcontractor's being replaced, likely after being exterminated.

Though long-term relationships between firms and subcontractors can and do exist, there appears to be limited inter-organizational mobility between subcontractor and firm, that is between a gang and a DTO. Though the Zetas successfully *transformed* from being a subcontractor into a being firm, none of its members successfully transitioned from being a member of the subcontractor group into being a member of the firm. Historically, we also see little movement of actors between one organization and another.

Intra-organization mobility typically happens as a result of internal promotion whereby the best, or most ruthless, operatives within the protection wings rise through the ranks and take charge. Accordingly, there is little reason to believe that individuals move between firms with any facility. What is more probable is that when individuals leave one firm, they attempt to create a competitor, as was the case with Chapo Guzmán when he left the Cartel of the Pacific. When one firm supplants another, it either absorbs or eliminates the defeated organization's remnants. Similar patterns of behaviour are seen within the prison environment vis-à-vis prison gangs.

Managing the highest levels of the wholesale drug market is risky enough so that firms prefer to delegate the responsibility for the retail distribution of the product or the undertaking of dangerous actions to subcontractors, thus diversifying their risk portfolio. These subcontractors can be organizations, such as prison gangs, or individuals, such as Pedro and Margarito Flores (b. 1981), the twin brothers who supplied the Chicago market, and by extension the Midwestern market, with billions of dollars' worth of drugs from the Sinaloa Federation (Meisner 2014).

Bruce, who became an *esquina* for BA, talked about a time during his boyhood when he accompanied his father, who worked as a transportation subcontractor for a DTO, on a trip to Chicago to smuggle drugs: "He had set it up with... there's a cartel in Juárez. He was a truck driver, so he had means of taking them the *lizo*<sup>53</sup>. Either you're

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<sup>53</sup> Transporting the payload.

lucky or you're not lucky. We passed by Sierra Blanca, we were lucky that time. We took it in an 18-wheeler. Later we dropped the 18-wheeler off, took the dope out of the trailer. They're seals<sup>54</sup>; you can make seals to match their seals on the trip. We put it on a U-Haul and we took off heading toward Chicago."

On their journey, they were stopped by the police and his father was arrested; the burden of the loss lay squarely on his shoulders. Possession, though not necessarily ownership, of the product and the risks that went with it had been transferred from the cartel to him.

Along the border, the relationship between the firms and the subcontractors is quite close, given that El Paso and Juárez are two sides of the same coin. However, the transfer of risk associated with the drug trade does not end with a product's first transfer; risk remains attached to the product and affects an array of businesses and individuals as it trickles down to the streets.

These dynamics were not part of what I could access in El Paso; it was time for me to move on in order to see them.

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<sup>54</sup> Shipping seals are placed on trailers to show recipients that the load has not been tampered with during transportation.

### III: OF RELATIONSHIPS AND REALITY

## PHOENIX: AN OASIS IN THE SONORAN DESERT

### *MOVING TO PHOENIX*

With the big red pickup truck packed, I bid farewell to the borderlands, my home for the past five months. I left Chucotown and headed west through the Franklin Mountains and found myself in New Mexico. The first town I passed was Chaparral, a place that had come up in conversation during my time in El Paso. Some immigrant families prefer to settle in Chaparral because they can own property and enjoy recognized status here. From the road, it's little more than a collection of small homes and trailers scattered amongst the desert vegetation, but that's what paradise looks like for some people.

New Mexico is one of the five poorest states in the nation. Many of the towns I drove through rang of small town America with quaint grocery stores being the main feature. The drive through Deming and Silver City was characterized by a large number of trailer parks, each with a small cluster of homes. Oddly enough, they didn't detract from the beauty of the desert. The clear blue sky, with its smattering of wispy white clouds, illuminated the hues of brown and green that paint the landscape as mountains and hills frame the background. The colours alone broke up any threat of monotony the drive posed.

Crossing into Arizona was a welcome change of pace from the flatness New Mexico had to offer; its countryside was gorgeous. The twisting roads passed by a variety of rock formations while saguaro cacti adorned hills far as the eye could see. Over four hundred miles from El Paso, I pulled into Greater Phoenix, which lies in a large, flat valley, an area that is twice as large as El Paso and home to a rapidly growing population that now is nearing four and a half million people (Toll 2015). Most of Arizona seemed desolate, in part because roughly two-thirds of the entire population of the Grand Canyon State lives in its capital city.

Phoenix on its own is about one and a half million people, making it the sixth largest city in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). However, Phoenix is part of a larger metropolis, unlike most I've visited. Greater Phoenix includes several towns, each with its own identity. South of the metro area is the country's largest public park, the South Mountain. To the north, there are more mountains, including Piestewa Peak, formerly known as Squaw Peak. In some ways, Greater Phoenix reminded me of El Paso and Juárez, with its mountainous sky line, crappy drivers, and income disparity

exhibited through its different neighbourhoods. Although the city lies shy of two hundred miles from the border, its residents are more diverse than El Paso's. According to the last U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2016) taken in 2010, Phoenix is 40.8 per cent Hispanic, which is evident in the neighbourhoods that feel, culturally, like El Paso. The rest of the people are mostly white.

As I drove through the city, I encountered a fair share of erratic driving. Unlike El Paso where 80 to 90 per cent of the drivers seem to cruise under the speed limit, oblivious of their surroundings, more people speed here. A local attorney, Andy, who put me up for a few days while I searched for a place to live, speculated that Hispanic drivers will not drive over the speed limit because they fear unwanted police attention. While that may be the case, I never was pulled over during my time in Phoenix. The roads are wide and fast, and getting from place to place is easy. The street signs are helpful, telling you which town within the Phoenix metropolitan area you are in.

### *THE ROOM SEARCH*

I started the search for a room in Phoenix a couple of weeks before I left Texas. As I flicked through room ads, I noticed three distinct ad types: normal, sober living, and perverted. The normal ads requested a roommate or someone to move in for a sublet during the summer months. Sometimes, these ads were placed by rental agencies. Nonetheless, normal ads, without weird strings attached, seemed to be in small supply. I responded to any ad that had enough information to be taken seriously.

Then, there were ads for sober living, offering rooms by the week, often between 100 and 150 dollars. These ads led me to believe that Phoenix has either a lot of rehab centres and/or a lot of drug users. Though the houses were nice and the price was right, I had no interest in living in such a dwelling. It turned out that my second supposition had been correct: one of my respondents lived in such a place and invited me in. The inhabitants were all in recovery. Ashtrays overflowed with heaps of cigarette butts, as nicotine and caffeine were the only drugs permitted on site.

Finally, there were ads trying to entice renters with "free rent" in exchange for "cleaning and companionship" or other, more thinly disguised requests for sexual favours. Though the vast majority of these ads were put up by males looking for female companions, there were the occasional ads put up by women. Or so they said; perhaps they were scammers looking for marks.

### *MOVING IN*

As I drove over most of the city of Phoenix looking for a place to stay, I realized that living in Phoenix was more expensive than El Paso. Most of the housing I considered was located in relatively new housing developments, a good distance from my downtown office. After viewing several rooms, I came to realize that I didn't want to live outside Phoenix proper, in towns that felt like suburbia and were too far – both physically and politically – from the specific community that I sought to study.

I moved into a small house located just west of the city centre. The signs on the neighbourhood's street read "Historic Oakland." Although it was a low-income area, the houses seemed to be in pretty good condition, except the house up the street that some crack-heads had burned down. I saw kids playing in the street. Plus, I could afford it and I was within reasonable walking distance to my office.



**Photo 8: A motel on the edge of Historic Oakland, near Van Buren.**

As I walked around the neighbourhood, I felt fine. People greeted me. Some even stopped to chat. The demographics were primarily Hispanic, both Chicanos and Mexican nationals, though there was the occasional older white person who had lived in the area for ages apparently. One house's mail box comically read "male box." Yes, there were some guys who were gang members, dressed as *cholos*, with clear, gang-related tattoos adorning their arms. They were out in the evenings, possibly selling



dope, but that didn't deter kids from playing at the same time in the nearby streets. I never saw any static; the neighbourhood was calm and reasonably safe.

Friday nights were the busiest nights or, rather, the only nights that offered any sense of partying. Older Mexican men sat at tables in front of their houses, playing cards, drinking beer, and listening to Norteño music as it pumped from the speakers of their beat-up pickup trucks. They usually nodded to me or greeted me as if I were Hispanic myself. All things considered, despite its being the "barrio," Oakland seemed fine.

The worst thing about the area was its proximity to Van Buren, a street which was frequented by people strung out on drugs, mostly tweakers<sup>55</sup>. The Circle K's parking lot was full of filthy men and women who were panhandling everyone who was unfortunate enough to need to buy gas or desperate enough to buy a four pack of Steel Reserve malt liquor there. The panhandlers slept on the sidewalks unmolested. Sometime, at night, severely mentally ill people could be seen walking down Van Buren Street, screaming in self-dialog. Barring the number of drug addicts in close proximity, Oakland had a similar feel to the Sunset Heights neighbourhood of El Paso where I stayed: there were some seedy elements, but on the whole, things seemed okay. I was well situated and ready to get back to work.

#### *NAVIGATING THROUGH PHOENICIAN POLITICS AND RISK CLAIMS*

As I moved through the different parts of the city, the distinctly rich and poor neighbourhoods echoed the neighbourhoods of Ciudad Juárez. Though I was told that the housing market was abysmal, much of the city offered large, expensive-looking homes, populated by middle-aged, or older, white people who prefer to live in gated communities. The rich and the middle classes disappeared behind their tall, protective walls. Unlike Juárez, there wasn't broken glass on the top of the walls for an extra layer of protection. Adorning the streets were political ads dominated by Republican hopefuls who slammed their (often fellow Republican) opponents for being too liberal or for being too close to President Obama. The south side neighbourhoods, which I was told were the ones to avoid, seemed to be made up of smaller, single family homes, likely occupied by blue-collar Chicanos, African Americans, or immigrant families. I

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<sup>55</sup> Methamphetamine users.

didn't notice many election signs there, perhaps an indication of the lack of political participation expected or even demanded from the area's residents.

I soon came to realize that my perception of Phoenix's politics, which I thought were solidly Republican, was not entirely accurate: at the time, the politics varied, with Greater Phoenix having two of the most liberal congressmen in the country, Raúl Grijalva, the co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), and Ruben Gallego, a vice chair of the CPC, in addition to its slew of conservative congressmen. Maricopa County and Arizona's conservative Republican governors grabbed the headlines, but maybe such coverage was just good media strategy on the part of the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) and the Republican Party. The dominant, nationally visible, anti-immigrant discourse, which I associated with the nationally controversial Arizona S.B. 1070<sup>56</sup>, formally known as the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act," appeared to target unauthorized immigrants for the state's woes and associated serious crime, particularly kidnapping, human trafficking, and drug trafficking (K. M. Campbell 2011).

The law had become controversial because it appeared to *obligate* local law enforcement, such as sheriffs, police, and other policing bodies, to arrest unauthorized immigrants by stating that "No official or agency of this state or a county, city, town or other political subdivision of this state may adopt a policy that limits or restricts the enforcement of federal immigration laws to less than the full extent permitted by federal law" (Arizona S.B. 1070 2010, 1). The impetus of the bill fed off the Latino threat narrative, by placing the blame for many of the ills identified in Arizonan political rhetoric on the shoulders of unauthorized Mexican immigrants. Former Phoenix Chief of Police, Jack Harris would tell me that he did not support the intent of the bill, given the detrimental effects that asking for and investigating immigration status would have on police-community relationships. That position was frequently, though not universally, repeated in my interviews with Phoenix police and other law enforcement personnel.

Another part of the broader political rhetoric in Arizona and Phoenix specifically included claims about the risks that Phoenix faced. Some alleged that the unauthorized immigrants who the authors of S.B. 1070 targeted were responsible for a rash of

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<sup>56</sup> Senate Bill

kidnappings (Sanchez 2014), a claim that made the national press. These kidnappings created a Greater Phoenix Area-based moral panic in which police and journalists declared Phoenix the kidnapping capital of the United States (U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General 2012). A report, commissioned by the City of Phoenix, showed that while the number of claims was difficult to verify, there was a home invasion problem “closely linked to the drug trade and human smuggling” (Thoreson et al. 2011, 5). Speaking with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, several police commanders indicated that while there were a lot of kidnappings, the risk to the general public was nominal; those who were victims were generally people living in stash houses.

The Arizona Attorney General lists several instances of DTO activity since 2008 (Arizona Attorney General 2016). And while such operations indicate a lot of illicit drug traffic through Phoenix, and Arizona more broadly, there appears little evidence to support implications that local law enforcement has ceded control to DTOs in the region, such as those made by Pinal County Sheriff Paul Babeu (Key 2015) and on the National Geographic produced *Drugs, Inc.: Cartel City, Arizona* (2013). Those claims were downplayed or contradicted not only by the law enforcement people I interviewed but also by the gang members. After sorting the wheat from the chaff, I was left with a far less sensationalized understanding of the drug market in Phoenix.

## SEVEN: A FEAR OF CORNERS

### *DELIVERY: DEVOLVED DRUG DEALING*

“Why are you focusing on gangs?” asked Eddie, a member of the Hispanic prison gang known as the Arizona Eme<sup>57</sup>. We had been talking about street gangs for the past hour; he was confused and agitated as to why I thought they were important. Eddie wasn’t the first person in Phoenix – gang member or cop – to tell me that street gangs were in decline in the area, but he was the first to couch street gangs’ primary role in entrepreneurial terms. Historically, gangs have served as retailers (Arizona Criminal Justice Commission 2016), often serving customers who were intent on buying product on street corners.

Relying on street gangs to stand on the corner and sell dope, Eddie claimed, was a thing of the past: “[Street gangs are] dead, man. They’re nothing. [The Eme doesn’t] use them to sell drugs. They’re not even left around to sell for us. Look at where the money is. We deliver directly to sons of doctors and lawyers or whoever [has money]. That’s whose buying. There’s a driver system now [to sell drugs]. I have a series of drivers who deliver for me. My drivers aren’t going to know who I am. How does that happen? Let’s say I know you and I trust you. Ok, I’m giving the drugs to you and then you know your cousin and you trust him. You give him the drugs and he delivers. He gets phone calls with directions. There are spots; they change. The directions would be ‘Get the pick up at this spot and drop it off over there.’ That’s how it would work for longer deliveries. The driver’s number would be changed every two months, maybe sooner. He’d get paid depending on the weight<sup>58</sup> he is moving.”

Luis, a former member of the West Side street gang, told a similar tale, though the actors in charge were somewhat reversed in his story. According to Luis, the Eme doesn’t have much sway on the street; members of his gang negotiated their own plugs

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<sup>57</sup> While the Arizona Mexican Mafia shares its name and nickname with similar organizations in California, Texas, and elsewhere, gang members I spoke to indicated that these organizations are not networked or otherwise related in their contemporary iterations.

<sup>58</sup> amount of product

with drug wholesalers and would then, in turn, find non-gang-affiliated *paisas*<sup>59</sup> to sell their product. “All the drivers were *paisas*. All of them,” Luis explained. “So the *paisas* would buy an ounce or two [of heroin from one of us], sometimes more, chop it up and balloon it – put everything in balloons [for retail sale] – and send out their drivers.”

It would take some doing to sort out what was going on with the street and prison gangs, but the driver system undoubtedly featured in the contemporary drug scene. Adelita, a woman associated with the Eme and a former shot caller in a women’s prison where she served three months shy of 24 years, succinctly described what the chain of distribution in a typical drug crew looks like: “[At the top,] you got the *mero* who’s running it, who’s the shot caller; then you got the next one that transports it; the next one that distributes it; and the last ones that deliver it, like in the car.” Her description was one that summed up what I learned from other users, dealers, and law enforcement members. While the delivery system meant that “the street-level drug trade [in Phoenix] isn’t what it used to be,” as long-time Phoenix cop Commander Baker (not his real name) indicated, it still exists.

#### *THE DRUG TRADE IN PHOENIX*

The drug trade in Phoenix can be divided into three broad market types: specialty, retail (street-level), and wholesale. The specialty markets are relatively small. They feature drugs with relatively little demand by volume, like crack cocaine or “wax,” a product derived from cannabis resin. In Phoenix, such products have specific client bases who allow the relatively small producers to generate enough business to stay afloat. Duke spoke about his past as a crack dealer. He served the largely African American users who preferred the product to the other hard drugs available on the street and was able to make enough money to satisfy his needs and desires: “I wasn’t balling by no standards<sup>60</sup>. [...]n a month I’d probably sell six ounces, somewhere around there.”

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<sup>59</sup> My respondents in Arizona would most often use the term *paisa* to refer to a Mexican and *Mexican* to refer to a Mexican American. I have maintained this convention in this chapter to maintain congruence with the quotes used.

<sup>60</sup> Turning over large amounts of money and/or spending ostentatiously.

Ryan, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, described the success of his wax business: “My household has a monopoly on it in Tempe<sup>61</sup> because we’re the only ones figured out how to do it. [...]t takes a lot of weed. But the profits are staggering.” He went on to describe the community of users he services and how the market dynamics worked below him: “[I]t’s always younger people [who go for wax]. Not necessarily kids, but younger people. Shit, you get a couple of them younger people that are hip, cool, especially in Tempe where they got a little money. They always know everybody. You start slinging it to him, he slings it to his friends, and then you just kick back and don’t do shit. Make wax and kick it. There’s no risk because how many potheads have ever told on anybody? No pothead’s going to tell on anybody [...].”

Nonetheless, it does not appear that these markets are very big or, in the case of wax, even well known to the city’s regular drug users who tend to prefer, besides marijuana, the three main hard drugs offered for retail sale: cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines, with the last being the most widely consumed hard drug in Greater Phoenix (Cunningham 2014).

Cocaine, heroin, and meth are now imported from Mexico. Most of the heroin and meth consumed in Phoenix, and probably the U.S., is likely produced and processed in Mexico (Brouwer et al. 2006, Shukla, Crump, and Chrisco 2012). Heroin has a long history of being produced in Mexico which supplies the U.S. market more so than the large-scale producers of the drug in Asia (Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2009, Ciccarone 2009). The War on Drugs made producing heroin profitable in the 1970s, thereby encouraging Mexican producers to enter the market that had been previously dominated by Turkish goods (McCoy 2003).

“[B]lack tar heroin [has been] produced by the Mexicans for a long, long time. And they realized that the black tar heroin is not as appealing to middle and upper class [users] because you have to shoot it and [those consumers were concerned about] the needles, AIDS, all that kind of crap,” explained Elizabeth Kempshall, who was then the head of the Arizona HIDTA. “So, what the Mexicans did was they brought in chemists from China and Columbia to say, ‘Teach us how to make this white heroin.’ So, what the Mexicans do, they make a cinnamon coloured heroin that you can snort, you can

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<sup>61</sup> Tempe is an inner suburb of the Phoenix Metropolitan Area, located between Phoenix and the rest of the East Valley. The main campus of Arizona State University is located here.

smoke, makes everybody really happy and not have to use a needle. So, the vast majority of heroin abused in the United States is coming from Mexico.”

Though currently most of the meth consumed in the U.S. market is produced in Mexico with precursor chemicals being shipped in from Asia, that wasn't always the case (Shukla, Crump, and Chrisco 2012). Until the early 2000s, meth was largely produced domestically and sold by outlaw motorcycle gangs (Haislip 1996). Then Mexican producers recognized the economic potential of meth and began producing it in wholesale amounts (National Drug Intelligence Center 2003). Moreover, the Mexican product is crafted in a laboratory setting that yields a product purer than what could be typically produced in the backroom labs that dotted Arizona and California during its domestic heyday (Scott and Dedel 2006, Cherney 2014). Law enforcement crack downs on smurfing and the impromptu meth labs coupled with the cheap influx of superior quality product led to the demise of the domestic meth producer as well as a shift in the actors involved in the local meth trade (Cunningham, Liu, and Callaghan 2009).

### **The Retail Market**

Ultimately, regardless of the hard drug sold, retailers rely on suppliers with connections to transnational wholesalers to meet the demand they face from their customers. The retail drug trade occurs in a variety of phases and locations that include a wide array of actors, several of whom, despite the inherent interpersonal relationship between buyer and seller, never interact with each other. However, the market does have a bottom, an entry point for those with no connections but a desire to get high: the corner. And while the role of gangs in running the corner may be declining, it is not yet completely dead.

### *The Corner*

“[T]here still needs to be a corner where the dope is at, for the people who don't have phones, don't have cars, [or] don't have a place where they can be,” explained Natividad Mendoza, a former member of the California prison gang called the Bulldogs, who now runs a non-profit that works to turn Phoenix gang members into contributing members of society. Phoenix has many users who fit Natividad's description. I saw several loitering on the main street near where I lived.

Their presence was explained by my neighbourhood's proximity to the Human Services Campus of Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS), which is located some six blocks from the state capitol building. The difference between the capitol and CASS is

stark. Around the capitol, clean, well-coiffed, and well-dressed people who work in the government buildings walk with purpose to their jobs. Around the Human Services Campus, dirty, dishevelled, and poorly-clad people loiter or mosey along with no obvious direction.



**Photo 9: People waiting outside of the human services centre at CASS.**

Fidget, a man who became homeless about twelve months prior to meeting me, described the chaotic lives of the vast majority of people he had met while living on the streets and being around CASS: “Everybody out of [the] 50 [people] I have met [living out on the street] are on drugs. They go across the street [from the shelter to a store and] steal a bottle of whiskey. ‘Hey, do you want to sell this?’ [Fidget shook his head no as if to respond.] ‘Why not? I need a bum,’ [So I tell them] ‘Like why don't you just drink it? It might do you a little better.’ [The drug users are] always looking to scam; always, [to get something] for that next hit.” For these drug users with chaotic lifestyles, open-air markets are the best, and perhaps only, place to score their next fix.

Occasionally, I went to CASS with Teddy Needles, a young man who ran a clandestine harm reduction program. He fielded a lot of interest in his program from people who reported that they were intravenous drug users, his target population. Unlike in Juárez, giving out needles is illegal in Phoenix: “Normally, I do outreach on a



bike,” Teddy said. “If I see a five-0<sup>62</sup>, I’d be out of here because if they caught me with needles, I could be in big trouble. Fortunately, I’ve never been caught. The bike helps me get a move on quick.” Ordinarily, Teddy provides users with a kit that consists of clean hypodermic needles; a cooker; cotton filters; alcohol swabs; condoms; two vials of Naloxone, an anti-opiate used to pull people out of heroin overdose; the syringes needed to administer the Naloxone; and a pamphlet that explains how to use it.

Teddy’s contact number is circulated by word of mouth, and he responds to whoever calls for his help, after a short vetting process over the phone. A former IV drug user himself, Teddy explained that twelve-step style desistance programs are not for everyone: “Not everyone, for example, wants to do religion. I didn’t. Sometimes people need the accountability of safe using before they can turn the corner.” For Teddy, responsible usage was a first step to reducing the chaos that characterized these drug users’ lives, the chaos that drove them to buy from the corner.

Individuals who dealt and used drugs described a correlation between the degree of trust a dealer had in a client and the degree of access that client had to the wider supply chain the dealer was a part of. All users, unless they are vouched for by a trusted party higher up the supply chain, have to start with the open markets and demonstrate their reliability to the community of suppliers they wish to deal with, a pattern described by Brownstein and Taylor (2007) in various markets throughout the U.S., including Phoenix. The guys who are working the corner, selling individual use quantities for five to twenty dollars, are often gang members who are looking to earn some capital.

Dealers in the drug trade attempt to manage risk; however, when it isn’t possible to manage risk, they often accept whatever terms they come by, given the potential financial gain. Carmencita was a dealer who felt trapped by the lack of licit financial opportunity she faced: “I never wanted to rely on selling drugs. I always had regular jobs. But whenever I would become unemployed, I would always fall back to selling. That was my biggest problem. I didn’t like it, but it was the only way I knew how to make enough money to pay for everything. Even when I was in school, I would sell. It was easy money and I had so many mouths to feed – it was a way for me to do that. Throughout my life, I guess I just met the right people. I would sell for the Eme and for

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<sup>62</sup> Police; a term popularized by the television show *Hawaii Five-0*.

myself. Because of that, I had little risk. I never sold the drugs on the street. I've always had people under me. I just managed the spots."

Mike, an African American gang member originally from California, had worked as an underling before. He described the ability to sell drugs on the corner as a favour that a dealer would grant a subordinate. Money was to be made in "doubling up," that is, cutting the product: "So half cocaine, half baking soda. The dude [who supplied you, the retail dealer, is] not losing nothing. He gained his money, but you the homie. He want to see you eat. You know what I'm saying? So what they do... I mean, they make rock<sup>63</sup>. That's how they make rock. They cut it up. Ol' boy, he already making more than his money back. So like, 'This is the little homie. I want to see him – you know what I mean? – have a little extra money in his pocket.'" The adulteration allows the corner retailer to pay for the principal and buy another batch which is then cut and resold and becomes net income.

I was told by the cops and the gang members alike that the amount of hand-to-hand selling that happens on the corner today is infrequent compared to a few years ago; anything larger than a daily quantity requires one to visit a supplier's house. As in El Paso, there is a kind of hush on the open air drug scene: it's unusual to see gang members posting up on the street corner in Phoenix. In my neighbourhood, which had a few gang members, I rarely saw any groups congregating. Most of the time when I spotted a gang member, he was in transit at dusk or dawn, or simply sitting on his porch, drinking beer or hanging out with his family. Being in a residential area meant that, out in plain sight illicit businessmen kept their trade to a minimum, not to draw attention to themselves. Nonetheless, I learned from the officers who responded to a call I made after being burglarized that it was unlikely that anyone in my neighbourhood would ever call the police unless something affected them personally or there was a serious incident, such as a murder.

In the past, neighbourhoods like mine featured open-air markets that could accommodate relatively large requests, but those transactions had moved from the corner to somebody's house, out of public sight. K.C. Hill, who worked for the state-wide task force GIITEM, the "Gang and Immigration Intelligence Team Enforcement Mission," and was part of several undercover missions targeting gangs and those

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<sup>63</sup> Crack cocaine.

involved in the drug trade, attributed this shift away from the corner, to successful law enforcement operations and prosecutions: “We used to see neighbourhoods where guys were posting up on corners or walking down the street, five and six deep, dressed in their colours and flying their flags and hanging their rags out of their pockets. You don’t see that anymore because [GIIEM has] been working the gang cases on them. [...] So, [the street gangs] changed the way that they do business because they try to keep their opposition, which typically is going to be law enforcement, [off their backs].”

### *The House*

Users, stable enough to buy product reliably and, perhaps, in slightly larger quantities, would develop their supplier’s trust so that they could enter the supplier’s house. Developing trust is essential because suppliers want to ensure that desperate addicts are kept at bay. They are not a clientele that many dealers like engaging with. Linus who sold “G” – the clear, highly processed methamphetamines that look like “glass shards” – felt that the corner was too risky: “Out of the house is different because you got people knocking on your door and you ain’t going to answer the door unless you know them or somebody brought them there.”

Breeze talked about his move from buying off the corner to gaining access to suppliers shortly after he began looking for cocaine in the 1980s. His wife, who was dealing to her friends – “housewives and other women like that” – lost her connection, a white guy, who she failed to pay once too many times. Breeze then sought to find another source of cocaine: “I started going to the inner city, in Phoenix. [...] The ‘Mexicans<sup>64</sup>’ approached me.] I was down there [in the barrio] looking; I knew it was rampant down there. This was the beginning of crack. So people were walking up to people [like me] and saying ‘do you want something,’ and they were talking about crack.”

At first Breeze bought quantities that would last him for a week or more. But then, as he became more and more addicted, he returned to the neighbourhood to buy small quantities that he would consume immediately. Though an addict, he was a reliable customer and an ex-con, two attributes which “gave [him] as much trust as anybody can expect to have in that community.” He usually brought his money. But, if

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<sup>64</sup> Here Breeze is referring to Chicanos, that is Mexican-Americans.

he didn't have money, he was willing to do some dirty work, such as beating up another debtor for his dealer, allowing him to earn credibility and respect from his drug suppliers.

That trust earned him invitations to enter his suppliers' homes and to hang out with them. It allowed him, later on, to access larger quantities which he then provided to the motley crew of people who occasionally stayed in his house. Though he never considered himself to be a drug dealer, Breeze assumed the role of supplier to his circle of friends who traded services and errands for a taste of what was on hand. Being a supplier allowed Breeze to gain the contacts necessary to supply his demands.

Stu, a recovering meth user, recounted a similar progression. His dealer, who lived in a remote edge of the greater Phoenix area, did not offer a delivery service. Stu described the dealer as "a nice guy," who was on friendly terms with Stu's brother. Stu's brother had introduced Stu and that enabled Stu to approach the dealer on his own. While Stu never got too friendly with the dealer, his brother did and after a while was introduced to "Mexicans from Mexico, and they would sell him the stuff really cheap. So, he was getting ounces of meth."

Not all of the houses where drugs are sold are so chummy. Carmencita, a woman who was getting ready to go to prison to serve a sentence for selling drugs, told me about the trap house she lived in. Her partner, a member of the Eme, ran the business from her house with her children present. The way Carmencita talked about it, the house was a place where clients were served but not welcomed as guests. The police conducted a sting, and she and her partner were both arrested: "I didn't like [living in a dope house] but I went along with it. He was the boss. Whatever he said, went," she told me. "I didn't know how to stop it. I guess you could say that I was intimidated."

Nonetheless, the most common account of the house was that it served as a place where dealers were connected with reliable users and vice versa. To that end, dope houses are centres of relatively low-risk dealing for drug dealers, who in most cases are users too, and who are pleased not to have to deal with chaotic clientele on the corner. In parallel, the houses are loci of social development for users who garner trustworthiness within the drug community in which they wish to participate. After the initial point of contact is negotiated, either through successful, repeated street-level purchases or by being vouched for by a trusted connection to the proprietor, the house

provides an entrance to that larger community, usually in the form of a driver, or in rare cases, a bigger supplier.

### *The Number*

Getting a telephone number of a delivery driver requires a degree of trust. Sometimes that trust can be gained simply by being a certain type of client. Today, rather than going to the 'hood to find dope itself, a client may be trying to get a phone number. Anne, a harm reduction worker, reported that most of her clients were “people who meet the [delivery] guys in parking lots” after having called in an order. Her clients would be less chaotic drug users, perhaps college kids looking for some dope to throw a weekend party.

For the regular user, however, trust has to be earned. Earning trust may come about in various ways, from doing errands for the dealer, being his pal, or buying more than what the street dealer can supply. K.C. Hill described how he worked up the drug supply chain as an undercover agent: “I got hooked up with a street gang member and he gave me a phone number because I started to buy more than this guy could supply [... T] hat number might lead me to a *paisa* and that *paisa* was now delivering. And [the driver] had a guy that he was getting from and maybe I could work up to that guy. Maybe not. More than likely not, I would always get delivered to.”

The identification of a *paisa* as the typical delivery driver came up time and time again with outreach workers, police, and gang members frequently recounting that image. Breeze, a man who spoke about the driver system as existing in the late 80s or early 90s, described the drivers he first dealt with: “[The dealers have] got guys who come from Mexico, who just [have arrived and] have been brought by coyotes. In order to work off that trip, which sometimes [costs] a few thousand dollars [... the recent arrivals become drivers]. They become like pawns: completely expendable.”

K.C. Hill corroborated Breeze’s account. He described his experiences as an undercover buyer and how difficult it was to go up that chain of distribution: “When I bought [drugs] from *paisas* it was rare that they would even want to put me in touch with whoever their source of supply was and I don’t mean [the trafficker], I’m talking about just a guy that’s running a crew. Typically, [there] would be a guy that might [...] have a crew of five or six or seven different guys – Mexican nationals – that are basically errand boys. They’re just middlemen. They’re mules for [the dealer’s] drugs so that he doesn’t ever have to get his hands dirty. He doesn’t have to show his face and he doesn’t have to present himself or put himself out there [...] to get caught.”

The delivery system benefitted both consumers and the intermediaries in the supply chain. Clients who preferred to avoid the safety and legal risks of buying drugs in open air markets could do so. In addition, users reported that the service was reliable. After calling in an order, the delivery driver would be “at your house in 30 minutes or less,” Tony, a recovering heroin user, explained. Moreover, Tony preferred dealing with the drivers rather than his friends because the *paisas* offered consistency in terms of quality and price: “The *paisas* were suppliers, so it was a business to them.”

Although the delivery system did not feature any of the glitz and glamour of Hollywood drug kingpins, it shielded the dealers and allowed them to hide in plain sight. Breeze described how the dealers managed their drivers, sending “[the *paisas*] out in a car that [was] bought expressly for [delivering drugs]. It was chosen for its characteristics: it was not too new, it wasn’t too old, it wasn’t too big. [... The drivers] always did have a pager and, once phones came out, they always had a phone.” Their instructions were to deliver the products to the customers; collect payment; and, if a problem occurred, to destroy communications to their dispatcher. The drivers kept their phones “really close to them,” Breeze recalled. “And that phone got destroyed [upon arrest]. That was the first thing that was going to happen if they got pulled over. That phone was not going to work.” The next thing to go was the drugs. The drivers “would carry McDonald’s cups full of balloons in water,” Luis explained. “So if they got pulled over, they would drink it. Boom, swallow the whole thing real quick.” The drivers had a strategy and an incentive to shield whoever they were working for.

However, the *paisa* drivers, despite their provenance, were not members of, or working for, Mexican DTOs. They were merely part of the drug-running crews that served consumers; they operated on or just above the street level. With that clientele and pattern of service, the drivers possessed only relatively small amounts of product at any given time as to minimize the legal ramifications if they were caught. My participants identified the drivers as often, though not always, being recent unauthorized immigrant arrivals who typically dressed as Mexican *campesinos* or *vaqueros*<sup>65</sup>. Nobody I spoke to who was involved in dealing viewed drivers as people who either desired or were able to move up the ladder within the criminal enterprise they worked for. Yet, the drivers, being *paisas*, created confusion among some of the

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<sup>65</sup> farmers or cowboys

client base, who thought that they were dealing with somebody who was “connected.” It was a strategy that created a smokescreen that obfuscated either the identities of the actors within the supply chain or its component parts.

### *Smokescreening*

The delivery service is a mechanism that conceals the identity of the actors higher up the drug supply chain (Shelley and Picarelli 2002). It achieves this end by creating a “smokescreen” that limits physical contact between dealer and buyer, by putting one or more human or technological (such as a cell phone) intermediaries between both parties. Limiting physical contact can create deception by withholding information or implying wrong information, such that the dealer is part of a large, well equipped organization that is prepared to respond with violence should a deal go bad. By reducing the number of people within the network who possess knowledge of its structure and nodes, smokescreens reduce risk, including the risk of being arrested by law enforcement, cheated by clients, robbed by enemies, or cut out by others in the drug trade or the supply chain. This pattern of risk dispersal is one that can be replicated throughout the supply chain, from the trafficker to just a step above the driver or street dealer. At each level, there are people taking on a risk balance that is made up of two inversely related components: quantity held and visibility to consumers, competitors, and law enforcement.

The relationship between quantity and visibility is one of risk versus profit per unit sold. Moreover, it determines the terms of future transactions down the supply chain. The higher up one is in the supply chain, the more likely it is that this individual can set the terms and conditions for the buyer immediately below, including amounts to be paid and precautions to be observed. In this regard, the illicit drug industry works similar to licit wholesaling: a person, buying in bulk, makes payments usually significant in magnitude, thereby garnering a favourable cost per volume.

Conversely, when one is moving small quantities, the street market offers parallels to the problems encountered by licit retailers where demand, availability of disposable income, and competitor rates affect one’s ability to offload the product. Street-level drug dealers may be faced with consumers who may be less reliable. Accordingly, if street-level dealers are to maintain a client base, particularly when clients are short of income, they may have to allow for a degree of loss due to non-payment or offer delayed payment schemes, comparable to buying on credit in the licit economy.

Creating degrees of separation between each node of the network insulates actors holding larger quantities of product from the relatively high risks of low-level dealers who are more likely to be arrested and offered a deal by police and prosecutors to cooperate in exchange for favourable treatment. For instance, as K.C. Hill explained, at the street delivery level, should a driver get arrested, “he may know who his source is [but] may not know where that supply is kept.” Drivers, who are merely links between nodes, cannot inform on their co-conspirators should they be arrested or captured by enemies. To that end, by limiting subordinates’ knowledge of the network’s nodes and overall structure, dealers limit the capacity for law enforcement to map entire distribution networks if drivers are successfully pressed for information.

Moreover, drivers, upon arrest, have little incentive to inform on anyone, since they view their superiors as either trustworthy or paramount to their future success. A driver’s clean record and the relatively small amount of drugs that is in his/her possession would more likely result in a minimal custodial sentence, if any, and then deportation. Additionally, should a delivery driver experience any event – arrest, robbery, refusal to pay – that results in the loss of product, the amount lost in proportion to the whole amount being sold at a given point in time is more likely to be tolerated by his superiors.

In addition to minimizing risk to those higher up the supply chain, smokescreening allows higher-ups to maintain enough control further down the supply chain to ensure that the enterprise continues to generate its expected receipts in the face of non-payment. Individuals at the lowest ranks of a supply chain, such as drivers and customers, either do not know or are misinformed as to whom the original supplier is. Accordingly, in addition to protecting higher ups in the drug supply chain from capture or theft, smokescreening also allows dealers to imply they are part of an organization, such as the Sinaloa Cartel, which strikes fear in the intermediaries, thus encouraging a dealer’s subordinates to behave in accordance to the dealer’s wishes under the implicit threat of violence, whether real or mythological.

Smokescreening also benefits law enforcement. Misinformation as to who is operating in a given community can be valuable in terms of defining problems and requesting public support to resolve them. As it focuses on the operations of drug trafficking organizations, law enforcement use the moral panic generated by the media to include enforcement funding on the public agenda and to coax politicians into approving budgets which fund operations against such actors (Mazis and Staelin 1982,



Baumgartner and Jones 1991). For example, should the public believe that the Sinaloa Federation is operating in their city and contributing to violence and drug misuse, then, they are more likely to voice support for the police. Accordingly, when funding is on the line, it is to law enforcement's best interest to foster the myths that emerge from the smokescreen. However, such a strategy, antithetically to the law enforcement objectives of outing big players, helps those who are concealing their identity and attempting to assert control amongst the lower ranks of their organizations by providing additional credibility to the claims generated.

The practice of smokescreening illustrates that the drug business is evolving and responding to the risks of capture that open-air drug markets once posed. The clientele is several degrees removed from the traffickers who bring the drugs into the country. Drivers have no direct involvement or fixed association with the traffickers. Because those higher up the supply chain are protected by the smokescreens, undercover officers like K.C. Hill often struggle to work their way up the supply chain past the delivery driver to the plug – the person who supplied the drivers or even someone more senior in the network, forcing them to settle for low-level busts and leaving the critical machinery of the drug trade intact.

### *The Plug*

Getting access further up the supply chain, even for street-level dealers, is no easy task. One must develop a lot of trust to make that connection. Breeze spoke of his relationship with different people in the supply chain, indicating that his consistent purchasing got him enough credit to be able to interact with the person who was sending runners, but no one higher. He understood that the person above the runners was merely a cog in a greater machinery. Breeze could not go any higher in the supply chain, but nor did he want to; he was being supplied to meet his needs.

There appear to be racial roadblocks to gaining access to suppliers. Though Breeze was white, he could speak a bit of Spanish and was able to interact with the Hispanics he knew, which gave him some cultural capital. Mike, an African American gang member, described this situation thusly: "Everything comes from Mexico, believe

it or not. So you have to know a Mexican<sup>66</sup> that knows a Mexican that knows a Mexican just to get the plug. Now black people – don't get us wrong, we gang bang and we do the other bullshit; but when it comes down to business and drugs and stuff like that, we have to go to [a] Mexican 'hood." Here Mike is talking about Mexican Americans who would have a Mexican supplier, a *paisa*, who Mike was never allowed to meet.

Wrangler, a white man who associated with the Aryan Brotherhood while in prison, described how the changing demographics of his neighbourhood led to his being introduced to *paisas* who were moving meth in from Mexico: "The illegals started moving in and that's when I got the illegal drug dealer. When I was probably like 16, I started dealing with him." Wrangler went on to describe a specific contact from his neighbourhood, Carlos, who was the child of unauthorized immigrants. Carlos had gone on to become part of a Hispanic street gang, and later a prison gang, and had a connection with a wholesaler.

Eventually, Carlos was deported back to Mexico, but Wrangler was able to continue to exploit the connection and get supplied because he had been introduced around: "I knew [Carlos'] cousins and I still know his cousins and they all live in the same neighbourhood. And I knew them individually and kind of together but now... He finished his time about a year after my time, so [the U.S. Government] sent him back to Mexico. And now, the guy I was working with, his best friend is [Carlos'] homie's cousin. [...T] hat's kind of how their links work. They're all related or gang related."

Duke, a black man who claimed no gang affiliation whatsoever, used to deal drugs before he went to prison on a murder charge. He had to rely on people he knew from the neighbourhood until he went to prison and met better connections. Duke explained that his plugs were "a lot of dudes [he] grew up with." When asked whether they were all black people, Duke responded affirmatively.

Duke's main connection for drugs was a man from his neighbourhood who had a relationship with the Eme, a group that he viewed, incorrectly, as being a Mexican drug cartel. Duke described how, while in prison, a member of the Eme offered to supply him with drugs upon his release. While in prison, Duke cut hair. It is taboo for an inmate to get his hair cut by a barber from a different race. Nonetheless, a Hispanic

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inmate, who had enough clout to ignore that prison norm, sat in Duke's chair. As in a barbershop in the free world, patron and client talked during the haircuts, and Duke eventually learned that: "We knew a couple of the same people. [One] is a guy on the South Side, from my neighbourhood. He a connect forever, but he never would tell nobody: it was this dude's uncle<sup>67</sup>. His name was Grandpa. You know Grandpa? Yeah, I know Grandpa; I've been knowing that dude for like 15 years and they'd been selling dope about that long. Come to find out, that was the connect [in my neighbourhood] and he was trying to hook me up."

Duke's anecdote illustrates the role prison plays in connecting people who otherwise may not be connected in the outside world. Duke was considered to be a "stand-up" inmate; otherwise, the Eme member would have never approached him. Inmates knew that Duke had dealt before and was in prison on a murder conviction, which garnered him additional respect. These elements combined to overcome the racial barrier to entry that Duke faced on the streets with Hispanics who would have more direct access to wholesalers.

Hispanics, generally, did not report the difficulties that Mike and Duke faced to access drugs. For example, Linus, a member of the Wedgewood Chicanos street gang, never had a direct connection but simply used connections he developed in his community to gain access to supply: "I didn't have no access to *paisas*. I didn't talk to them. I didn't know any. [...] But you got people that are and those people usually have connects here within amongst our people and that's how [I had access]."

Lil G, a disgraced member of the Eme, talked about how, in the past, he had choices when it came to finding a plug: "There's always more people out there. If you're selling dope, I mean, you could get dope. Dope's easy to get. That's not a problem. I got connects." Lil G went on, indicating that, at his purchasing level, he was in a buyer's market. Accordingly, he never had any issues with the supplier, who always delivered what was promised because the driver "knew who he was fucking with. He knew he could get killed. He knew we would kill anybody. He knew if [he created a problem, we would end it....] But he was respecting."

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<sup>67</sup> In other words, the Eme member's uncle was wholesaling. Given the fact that there was a familial relationship between the Eme member and his uncle, Duke could piggy back off of that without having to worry about being ratted out.

Though many respondents identified the Eme as being the first intermediary from trafficker to street level dealers, Adelita, who had a long history with the Eme, contrasted Lil G's bravado by talking about who the plug always was and how important the *paisas* were if the Eme was to be supplied with the drugs they were pushing onto the streets: "It's always a *paisa* at the end of the day, no matter if [the Eme] want to deny it. However, they want to deny it, if they're dealing with another Chicano. With that other Chicano, still on the top, it's a *paisa*. It's always *México*."

Victor, another member of the Eme, talked about how his plug was developed over the course of several years, starting with his willingness to smuggle dope in a car over the border while he was a young man in the early to mid '90s: "Well, [my relationship with the Mexican suppliers] started back when I was, you know, like in high school. I started running it across the border; and then from there, driving it, and then on from there, from driving it. You know, they trusted me. I'd been doing it for quite some time. [...] I bought hundreds of pounds from them time after time. Even when I couldn't pay for it all, they would [...] front it to me. And I gave them their money, so I gained this trust thing with them. So when the time came – time for me to come up again [when] I'm down [and] I just got out of prison, they shoot me a little bit of something."

Like Victor, Damián, who used to sell marijuana and powder cocaine, talked about the importance and time it took to develop his relationship with a quality plug. For him, it was a matter of slowly going up the ranks and meeting more people within the network: "[My friends] would take me to their connections and I'd just weed them out, you know, who were the ones that had the good stuff and better price. So I mean, it just didn't happen overnight. This was a couple of years in the process; but then finally [...] I started running into the [*paisas*] that were literally just bringing it from Mexico to over here. And at the point, [...] because the one thing they want in Mexico is guns – and the one thing that I have is guns – [...] I found out that I could do better trades for guns for drugs. You know? It's cheaper. It works out cheaper for me because I can get the guns cheap and I can give it to them for a higher price and they'll give me the drugs for a cheaper price."

*Paisas* were consistently identified as the main suppliers. They were undoubtedly part of the transnational drug trade, dealing with different domestic players, who served as middle men from the point of entry into the U.S. on down to the street. At the lower levels, where *paisas* were hired to be delivery drivers, nobody who

was dealing suspected they were anything but disposable runners indebted to whomever ran them. But the *paisas* who were supplying weight were far less understood, with some of my respondents viewing them as middle men and others viewing them as *bona fide* cartel operatives.

As in Texas, judging by the proceedings at immigration court in Eloy, Arizona, where I was told the worst criminal aliens are processed, I saw little that suggested that a high percentage of unauthorized immigrants, relative to the number who immigrated, were engaging in the drug trade. One of the immigration judges with whom I spoke at the Eloy Detention facility noted that several of the people who appeared in her court were indeed traffickers. While that may be the case, I seldom observed reason-to-believe trafficker cases in the Arizona courts, which I observed just as frequently as the Texas courts, making it difficult for me to assess just how many “several” could be. Although unauthorized immigrants are part of the drug trade at some level, it is difficult to judge the proportion of unauthorized immigrants who are involved, which, based on what I saw in court, would be relatively small.

Nonetheless, determining the status and position of any given *paisa* within the drug trade is difficult. As with the lower levels of the drug market, at the higher levels of the trade, traffickers erect smokescreens that limit an outsider’s understanding of their networks.

### **The Wholesale Market**

The wholesale trade in Phoenix moves large quantities of illicit drugs through the area. Being located on the major highways I-10, which runs east and west, and I-17, which runs north, Greater Phoenix is an ideal place for “staging” drugs, a place where shipments are temporarily stored before being routed to destinations farther from the border. The prevalence of stash houses in Phoenix was responsible, in part, for the rash of kidnappings that plagued Phoenix in the late 2000s (Thoreson et al. 2011). Unlike El Paso, where little of the quality goods stay in the city, it appears that there is enough of a local demand in Phoenix to merit supplying the local distributors with reasonably quality product (National Drug Intelligence Center 2003).

The wholesale drug market is only part of what generates the sensational headlines about “Arizona’s crime problem” that are sometimes bandied about in the U.S. press. Some, in light of the kidnappings, conflate human smuggling with the drug trade; however, it appears that while *polleros* may use similar routes as drug smugglers, generally speaking, there is little overlap in the market actors and activities (Sanchez

2014). To that end, it is critical not to mistakenly problematize the drug trade as a function of human smuggling, or *vice versa*.

Developing a “history from below” of the wholesale drug market is difficult; negotiating direct access is impossible. Most of my respondents who had contacts with wholesale traffickers had not asked questions during their time with them. Doing so could have blown the connection or put them at risk since asking questions was considered as being beyond the realm of acceptable conduct in these types of relationships. Rubén, a man who had spent nearly his entire adult life in prison, talked about his relationship with drug traffickers in Mexico nearly twenty-five years before. His street gang had a relationship with a *paisa* wholesaler. An understanding of respect existed between them and was observed to minimize the need for violence: “I didn’t fear [the *paisa* suppliers] because, like I said, I stayed loyal and I stayed doing things. I called it doing things right and correct.”

Some members of the Eme talked about how they held the balance of power against the wholesalers given their superior gun and manpower and refuted any notion that the DTOs “ran the street” beyond supplying it with drugs. In other words, the presence of the wholesale networks in the U.S. are “transactional” rather than “territorial” (Jones 2016). Moreover, Eddie and Victor claimed that the Eme was able to tax the DTOs for moving dope through areas controlled by the gang. “You know what, [the cartels] are paying a percentage, maybe fifteen percent, to bring the large loads of heroin, weed, coke. I bet you didn’t know that,” Eddie told me bluntly. “The Mexican Mafia controls the traffic. Nothing happens without them knowing, taking a cut. And I can tell you that if somebody tries to move anything through here, they’re not moving anything unless they’re paying the Eme. Why don’t we bring it? Why take the risk? [The traffickers] want money. They’re still going to move it.”

“This cartel guy says, ‘I’m going to bring  $x$  amount of weed.’ And [the Eme says], ‘Okay, if you’re going to bring this much into *my* state, I want this much money to allow you to distribute it here,’” Victor explained, as he went on to note that the traffickers pay because they have the money and want to avoid the conflict that would negatively impact their bottom line. To that end, Damián said he never feared that those with whom he dealt would act against him “because, honestly, we had more guns than they did.”

The extent to which the Eme controls local markets, much less the wholesale one, came into question not only by street gang members but by law enforcement as

well. Given the structure of the drug trade, the Mexican DTOs are not necessarily the traffickers being taxed. Those who are being taxed are likely to be groups that are subcontracting for the DTOs' stateside distribution; therefore, the claim that the Eme is taxing traffickers, but not the Mexican DTOs *per se*, seems plausible, at least in some cases.

*Smokescreening via Compartmentalization: Division of Labour*

Those who run the wholesale drug trade run it like a game of three-card monte: they want those who are watching the game they are playing – law enforcement and enemy crews – to bite on what they think is important while the drug traffickers execute a slight of hand that leaves the watchers bewildered. Julie Marquez, an attorney who once defended members of the Cosa Nostra, summed up the underlying philosophy and presence of the most successful criminals succinctly: “Smart criminals are invisible. They have a presence everywhere, but they understand that they do not need any attention.”

As in the retail trade, the drug network managers use a division of labour. And this division of labour, coupled with the use of “go-betweens,” compartmentalizes their risks and minimizes the attention that any component part of the network receives, making it more difficult for law enforcement to take down entire networks (Jones 2016). As Rob Handy, the Chief of Police for Huntington Beach, California, and a former Phoenix police officer noted, “[Compartmentalization] is one of the reasons [trafficking networks are] so difficult to penetrate.”

Charles Loftus, Assistant Chief at the Arizona Attorney General's office, described the trafficking networks by comparing them to licit businesses that use independent contractors. Such businesses have centralized administration, but the contractors are not employees of those businesses. Contractors effectively operate their own enterprises and, accordingly, they assume their own risks without much recourse to the business that has contracted them. Drug trafficking networks work similarly. As Mr. Loftus explained, most of the contractors are run at “a little bit of arm's reach distance, whereas the central organization would be [the one who has] direct cartel links, but those [connections] are tight. So everybody has a role. [The DTOs] compartmentalize very well.”

Elizabeth Kempshall described the wholesale trafficking structure as a “command-and-control” system that manages movements through Arizona, which, according to her, is the Sinaloa Cartel's “primary corridor to bring their illegal product

into the United States. So, you have a distribution centre here, where the command-and-control elements in primarily Phoenix talk directly to the Tier-1 or Tier-2 targets in Mexico, and they get their instructions on where to move the drugs and how much to move it and all of that kind of stuff.”

The relationship is pyramidal, where tasks are delegated via a chain of command, much in the same way Al Capone ran his criminal enterprise in Chicago (Papachristos and Smith 2014). “You’ve got your organizational leaders,” explained Kempshall. “Then you have the Tier-1 which talks directly to the organizational leader. The Tier-2 is the one that talks [to] that Tier-1.”

Aaron Thomas, a Lieutenant with the Drug Enforcement Bureau in the Investigations Unit of the Phoenix police department, listed the broad array of jobs that a Tier-2 contact could have subordinates perform. These jobs included being the person who receives backpackers or other traffickers across the border; the person who transports people or products within Arizona; the person who mans the staging location; the person who picks up the money and transports it back to the bosses, or the person who is the muscle for the rare instances violence is deemed necessary. Whatever the job is, “that may be [that person’s] responsibility and that may be [his or her] only responsibility, and understand that if [s/he is] doing that job, [s/he’s] probably one of dozens that do that job. [S/he] just get[s] the phone call from [the boss].”

In other words, any given actor, involved in large transactions, has only one specific job to perform at any given point in time to minimize the risk of loss. As Thomas further explained, “So, this guy is handling dope, but he doesn’t handle money. If he gets popped with dope, that’s fine. [The organization can afford to] get rid of him, but [the organization doesn’t] lose [its] money at the same time. [The coordinator has] another group that handles money, that transports money back, whether they’re doing deposits in banks, or whether they’re doing boat carrying across the border, however they’re getting the money across. Sometimes, people will be used to do both things, but they’re not doing it simultaneously. I’m not taking you a load of dope [and] getting the money from you. [...T]hat’s typically not the process because there is too much to lose when you do that.”

The segregation of duties is practiced throughout the trafficker’s hierarchy, in an effort to diffuse risk by preventing any given person from knowing too much. It is a tactic used within licit business practices in order to safeguard assets by limiting fraud. In accounting, for example, when handling inventory orders, “one person orders goods



from suppliers, and another person logs in the received goods in the accounting system. This keeps the purchasing person from diverting incoming goods for his own use” (Bragg 2016). To illustrate the segregation of duties in the criminal context, Elizabeth Kempshall referenced the financial matters of the wholesale drug trade. DTOs receive significant proceeds from their wholesale deals; the cash flows need to be returned across the U.S. border to the drug trafficking organizations. Accordingly, traffickers run two separate command-and-control systems: “[There is] drug element command-and-control and financial command-and-control, and, usually, in most cases, the cartel tries to keep these two things separate because [...] [law enforcement] hurts the cartels more because [if we take out a centralized command-and-control structure, we are] not only able to take out their drugs, but [we’re] able to take out their money. So they’ve adapted to law enforcement techniques over the years, so they try to keep it separate. So, [there are] two different corridors that are running through Arizona.” With drugs coming in and money going out, and both being transported by separate and often revolving entities, it becomes difficult for outsiders to know where to look, creating a smokescreen.

Smokescreening also signals the presence and perhaps the dominance, in the U.S. wholesale drug market, of soft power, “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion” (Nye Jr 2004, x). Though this concept comes from international relations, it is applicable in this case, given the underlying political relationship of the wholesale drug trade: upper management imparts upon its direct subordinates the desire to maintain an enterprise that runs with minimal friction. Ultimately, the U.S. side of the trade must attract willing subordinates who share the core management group’s goals and who are determined to behave in a manner which is beneficial to the enterprise.

While hard power, that is coercion via violence, is still present in the wholesale drug marketplace and the protection rackets which ultimately underpin it, in Arizona, wholesalers appear to prefer to avoid violence since violence can bring unwanted attention from law enforcement. The asymmetric willingness to use violence between traffickers (who often are “subcontractors” for the Mexican DTOs; see, for example: Phippen 2013), who eschew it, and street and prison gang members, who embrace it, results in a violence avoidance strategy by traffickers embedded within their strategy to keep law enforcement guessing: there are enough layers to the trade so that if one component sours, the rest are resilient enough to compensate for its loss.

In short, upper-level bosses keep their subordinates from commingling by forcing them into a pattern of behaviour that requires tasks to be done singularly and disjointedly. This tactic ensures that any given participant below the core management group remains ignorant of the broader structure of the network. It is a smokescreen that enables the members of the core management group to protect themselves and maintain operational longevity, in part by finding willing participants, often gang members, to do the riskiest work.

### *Distance Decay*

The closest border crossing to Phoenix is where the border towns of Nogales, Arizona, and Heroica Nogales, Sonora, Mexico meet, a two-and-a-half-hour drive south. From Tucson to the border, the distance is measured in kilometres, though the speed limit remains in miles. The small towns still advertise their existence by announcing the year they were founded and their elevation. Nogales, Arizona, reminded me of Del Rio, in some respects: a small town on the decline. Every other gas station and corner shop is vacant and the abandoned buildings are dilapidated. Unlike Del Rio, there is no U.S. military installation to buoy the local economy, though there is a little jail. The downtown area is in decent condition, with duty free shops lining the walkway into Mexico and parking lots charging five or six bucks to look after your car.

The Arizona border towns are smaller than many of their Texas counterparts. Nogales, Arizona, clocks in around 21,000 people, and Heroica Nogales has just north of 220,000 inhabitants. Between the two towns, there is no river and therefore no bridges to cross. There's just a line in a building which is the port that allows one through the towering fences. One crosses *la linea*, skips pressing the revision button (as in Juárez), and presto, "*¡Bienvenidos a Heroica Nogales! Would you like to visit a pharmacy<sup>68</sup>?*"

I spent a few days in Heroica Nogales, speaking with four local reporters who covered the police beat and the drug trade in the area. One, Germán, showed me around town. Railroad tracks cut the town centre into two. Abandoned storefronts stood near the tracks. According to Germán, this neighbourhood is one of the most conflicted areas of the city. It isn't the poorest part of town, but it is a prime area for

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<sup>68</sup> Not only are the prescription medications cheaper in Mexico than in the U.S., but some drugs which are heavily regulated and controlled in the US are less regulated and more readily available.

crossing drugs, given its proximity to the fence and the underground water channels that run beneath the fence. It is also a good place for digging tunnels which can be used for smuggling goods into the U.S. Ironically, Nogales' most posh restaurant is located in this neighbourhood, in the midst of strip clubs, some of which double as brothels, and empty lots, where the drug addicts tend to live in the rotten squalor and dilapidated buildings that characterize the once prosperous area.

"You almost never see heroin here," Germán told me. Heroin was so uncommon in Nogales, Germán wasn't even familiar with the term *tecato*, the pervasive type of drug user in Juárez. "The users here mostly smoke methamphetamines," he informed me. We walked past the posh restaurant to the edge of the neighbourhood and back to the border fence.

"We have to be careful. We can't go wherever we want," Germán cautioned. "We can't talk in earshot of other people because we don't know who they might be. I can promise you that somebody is watching us now." Even the police couldn't be trusted: "It's hard to trust the police here. Nobody really trusts them. They are all owned by the cartels. And you don't know who they are working for, so it's better not to say anything to them."

One thing is for sure: there aren't any gangs in plain view. In Heroica Nogales, no gangbangers run around. The buildings are not tagged up. The city's residents are more worried about the individuals they don't recognize on the streets than the possibility of being attacked by a gang member. The dangerous people keep a low profile; they prefer to be invisible. Though some people will claim, that given the size of the city, it is an open secret as to who is involved in the drug trafficking organizations, no one will disclose names or discuss drug trafficking in public. Although people are not afraid to be on the streets, there are certain conversations no one is comfortable having in the open. The same was true in Juárez, where certain questions and key words would elicit fear and extreme caution, even in "safe" places.

In Heroica Nogales, people talk about cartels – they are the criminal actors of note. According to the reporters I spoke to in Nogales, regardless of what U.S. law enforcement says, there are two cartels: The Sinaloa Cartel and the Pacific Cartel (formerly the Beltrán Leyva Organization). They have divided the town between them, and neither can enter the other's territory without grave consequence. Germán told me that if we tried to enter a neighbourhood where we didn't belong, we too might run into problems, though, most likely, somebody would just intimidate us into leaving.

Despite the similarities of having a contested *plaza* and the perceived corruption and collusion of the police, the criminal landscape of Nogales is in sharp contrast to that of Juárez, where the DTOs work in tandem with local gangs to drive their agenda. Violence exists, but it is quieter, perhaps due to the lack of foot soldiers willing to fight or a conscious strategy to minimize unwanted attention. Plus, across the two Nogaleses, there is no relationship comparable to that enjoyed by Barrio Azteca in Juárez where the gang's members often move innocuously across the border, going to and fro in their daily lives, visiting family, shopping, or engaging in nefarious activities.

In short, Mexican Americans in Phoenix, who have family in Mexico, seem to spend less time and have relatively less contact with their families in Mexico. As a result, familial ties do not seem to be as strongly maintained as they are in the El Paso/Juárez area where families can meet up frequently. This difference in familial ties, in turn, affects those who are involved in the transnational drug trade. Members of the Barrio Azteca in El Paso are likely to have a relative or a close friend who lives in Juárez, meaning they are more likely to know someone who has contact with a Mexican wholesaler. Moreover, given the nature of the drug trade in the El Paso/ Juárez metropolitan area, participants in the drug trade may play a large array of roles – enforcer, transporter, and dealer – potentially working for either their gang or the DTO which has co-opted their gang.

The ability and opportunity for Phoenix-area gang members to do the same is virtually non-existent. Phoenix-area Chicanos may have family members who come from further afield than Nogales, the closest port of entry for licit and illicit goods. Geographically, Nogales is not a short drive from Phoenix, plus those driving north are subjected to the internal Customs and Border Patrol checkpoint. Consequently, Phoenix-area Hispanic criminal groups have fewer members who have legitimate contact with wholesalers in Mexico compared to El Paso. Those individuals who do have contact have it for one of two reasons: they come from a family who has one or more members who is directly involved with the transporting or staging of wholesale amounts of drugs into the U.S. or they have cultivated a relationship with a wholesaler over time by negotiating contact and becoming a valued part of the distribution network.

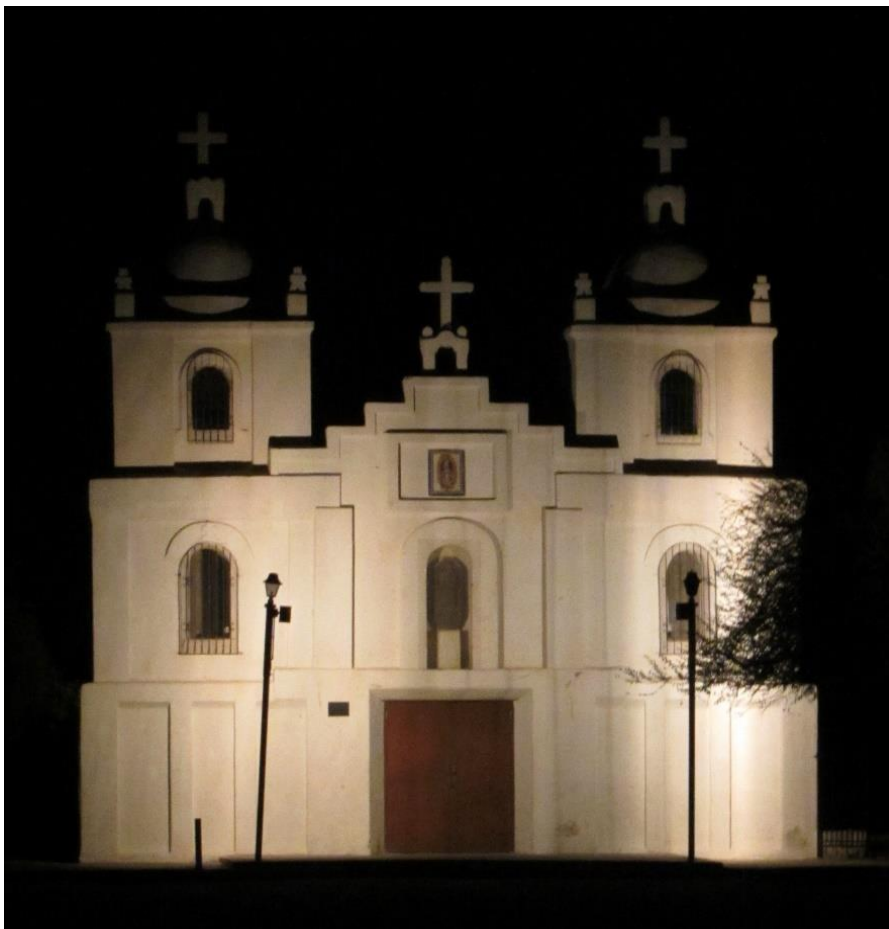
The practical consequence of this relationship dynamic is that there is less overlap between the array of people who are involved with wholesale trafficking activities and with retail activities in Phoenix than in El Paso/Juárez. “Distance decay,”

which is a concept used by human geographers to measure how distance affects interaction over space, can be used to describe this phenomenon as well (Taylor 1971). In the case of Phoenix, when compared to El Paso, family interaction between Mexican Americans in the U.S. and their extended families in Mexico has deteriorated. Accordingly, as family interactions deteriorate, the network of actors participating in the drug trade becomes more disassociated; as the distance between each individual node increases, with fewer contacts connecting them, the development of key relationships becomes a matter of cultivation rather than family and community history.

## EIGHT: PERSPECTIVE, PROTECTION, AND POWER

### *KEEPING PERSPECTIVE*

The Town of Guadalupe sits just beyond the city limits of Phoenix. It incorporated in 1975, and the town's Catholic priest, Father David Myers, has been there since before then. He talked of various drug traffickers and dealers who had come and gone throughout the years, Mexican men who had brought part of the wholesale trade with them and whose presence was the lynchpin of whatever drug trade the community experienced. While drug use is present in the community – with glass being the flavour of the day – Father Myers told me that “It's not common, and there's not a lot of people doing it.” To that end, those who eventually end up going down the road of drug using, dealing, or trafficking represent a minority of the community. However, it's a minority that garners a lot of attention from the press, the community, and law enforcement.



**Photo 10: Our Lady of Guadalupe, the church where Father Myers is a priest.**

I learned from Natividad Mendoza, who runs his *From Gangs to Jobs* reintegration program in Guadalupe, that the town, historically, has produced gang members, with several of these individuals becoming involved with the Mexican Mafia after incarceration. One of the higher-ups in the Mexican Mafia, who at the time was in prison, was from the area. Guadalupe's street gang culture appears to belong to a particular generation, whose members are in their 30s and 40s. Most youths do not participate in gang culture in the same way that the older generation did. Father Myers described the current gang activity of the town as, "Some kids are walking down the street looking for a fight and maybe they were high, although not necessarily, and they saw some other kids and they said well let's beat them up. And then they say, 'Well, it's our gang against your gang.' That's about where it's at." His description of a small, loosely organized gang presence was supported by local gang members I interviewed.

Nevertheless, as the drug trade and gangs come and go, the core problems of Guadalupe haven't changed. According to Father Myers, during his 40-year stay, poverty, low graduation rates, and high suicide rates have remained the community's biggest problems. "Of every 100 children who enter first grade, two graduate from high school," Father Myers explained. Drugs appear to be a symptom of these prevailing problems.

To illustrate his point, Father Myers recounted a time when he taught an ethics class at the Guadalupe campus of Stone Mountain Community College. He posed the following scenario to his students: "You want to support your family and you can't get a job and you've really, really tried. Really, you've tried. You *can't* get one. Would it be okay to sell drugs? Everybody said yes. *Everybody*. Men, women, young, old. They said yeah. And I [gave them a scenario in which] you have to support your spouse and your children, so it's not to get rich, just to support your family." Julie Marquez echoed this sentiment and applied it to a broader scale, referring to the motivations of people to become gang members, cartel operatives, and Mafiosos: "The common denominator in this world of organized crime is poverty. You have to realize that the driving force of crime is economic. People choose to commit crimes because it looks like a good way to get what they want. They continue to do so because it proves to be their best option, all things considered."

*THE STREET GANGS OF PHOENIX*

The official publications produced in Arizona which broach the subject of gangs identify gangs as an ongoing threat, citing their role in drug dealing, violence, kidnapping, trafficking, and home invasions, among a litany of other offenses (Arizona Criminal Justice Commission 2016, Hawkins, Zibell, and Vidale 2013, Zibell et al. 2014, Arizona Criminal Justice Commission 2015b, 2011, 2015a). Arizona law enforcement claims that over 90 per cent of the crime that occurs in the state is attributable to gangs (National Gang Intelligence Center 2011). The wide and serious array of offenses attributed to “gangs” in the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission reports appears to stem from a very inclusive reading of what gangs are; the reports include, in addition to street gangs, trafficking groups and prison gangs.

The definitional problem notwithstanding, understanding the trends of “gang crime” over time from the official publications is difficult; as time has gone on, the response rate of law enforcement bodies to the questionnaires that underpin the reports has plummeted (Arizona Criminal Justice Commission 2016), making a comparative, longitudinal analysis less accurate. Nonetheless, Arizona has the third largest street gang population in the U.S. behind California and Illinois (National Gang Intelligence Center 2011). With Greater Phoenix being the state’s largest metropolitan area, a significant number of these gang members likely live there.

To understand the Phoenix-area gang makeup, I spoke to a wide array of respondents, including community workers, police officers, and current and former gang members. According to my respondents, street gangs are relatively small and, typically, are not managing large conspiracies. Commander Baker, who had worked throughout the city over his career, told me that the gang makeup of Phoenix consisted of several small, geographically and ethnic-based gangs which are present in various parts of the city. Natividad Mendoza, who, via his work, has developed his expertise on Phoenix gangs for nearly a decade, echoed Commander Baker’s characterization: gangs in Phoenix “have neighbourhoods, a couple of blocks at a time, like right here in our little spot: we have 40th Street, we have Brown Pride, we have 48th Street, [and we have] 44th Street. We have four gangs right here in this little square mile [around my house].”

Commander Baker noted that violence related to gangs still pops up from time to time but has changed a lot over the years. According to the police commanders I spoke to, street gangs are less pervasive. Moreover, the gang violence which featured in gang-related activities that were particularly troublesome in the late 1980s and early



90s has diminished greatly, a characterization which echoed the trend my respondents recounted in El Paso.

“I think we are unique in our gang strategy,” Commander Baker said. “We have a state gang task force [GIITEM] which uses sophisticated techniques to identify and go after the structure of a gang. On the prosecution side, we use Arizona’s organized crime statute, particularly parts dealing with racketeering, conspiracy, and gang membership, to prosecute the higher-level targets and disrupt the gangs’ organizational structure. [...] Therefore, we’ve been successful in reducing gang activity. We don’t have the issues of L.A. or Chicago; the gangs are not as controlling in communities.”

Lieutenant Aaron Thomas, whose department focuses specifically on gangs and drug traffickers, explained how the department has undergone a philosophical shift to focus on “syndicate investigations instead of just hitting one gang member for doing an aggravated assault and then going after another gang member. We actually started targeting the gang itself and identifying its structure and identifying what kind of illegal activity [its members are] involved in. Then we started to being able to attack the whole gang and, as a result, I think that the city saw a decrease in gang activity. It didn’t go away, but [...] I think, right now, we are still in that kind of a lull where our gang activity isn’t really that extensive here in the city of Phoenix.”

From what Commander Baker and Lieutenant Thomas recounted, it is clear that the threat posed by the gangs to state authority and to the communities had diminished over time, even though drug distribution continued out of sight. A decrease in overt violence and drug use, though, was considered to be a positive development. To that end, in addition to a shift in the way law enforcement targeted street gangs, officers also spoke about the importance of community-based policing, a tactic that was universally presented as a useful and helpful strategy not only in reducing the incentives for youths to join gangs but also in improving the relations the police have with communities that have historically been apathetic or uncooperative. “We know that [the police] can’t arrest [our] way out of crime,” said Commander Baker. “So, we have several community-based policing practices like the G.R.E.A.T. Program<sup>69</sup>. Before

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<sup>69</sup> According to the program’s official website, “Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T.) is an evidence-based and effective gang and violence prevention program built around school-based, law enforcement officer-instructed classroom curricula. The Program is

we had those programs, we would sometimes have difficulty working within communities.”

Commander Tim Hampton, who used to be the Precinct Commander for Maryvale, a largely Hispanic area that was notorious for drug trafficking and gang activity and had a population that generally did not cooperate with the police, explained the multipronged strategy he employed in that community to improve police-community relations: “First of all, you remove the violence from the environment. Second of all, you have to give these kids something to do rather than associate with the gang trends that were occurring within the geographic area. We have to give them an alternative. Thirdly, most of the issues related to crime are always, as you know, 60 to 70 percent of all people arrested are either high or drunk or impaired in some way. You have to deal with that to transform a community.”

By several accounts, these strategies have reduced overt gang activity. Eddie, who proclaimed street gangs as being dead, said that: “You don’t see nobody no more wearing bandanas or throwing gang signs. You don’t see it. It’s changed a lot.” Skinny, a former California gang member who had moved to Phoenix to escape his past criminal life, noted the absence of visible gangbanging in the area when I chatted with him at a low rider car show: “It’s way different [in Phoenix]. It’s nothing like what you would see in South Central L.A. There’s less gangbanging, less tagging, less wearing colours, and less violence.”

“What do you mean that there is less violence?” I asked.

“Look, if I was to go back to my old ‘hood and wear a little red,” Skinny said, pointing to a prominent red letter on his white shirt, “some idiot might shoot me.”

“Why, because he thought you were a Blood?”

“Bloods and Crips are a black thing. The [Californian] Hispanic gangs are the Nuestra Familia and the Sureños. The Nuestra Familia are the 14’s, the ‘N’s.’ They wear red. We’re [the Sureños] the 13’s – because we’re linked to the Mexican Mafia<sup>70</sup>, 13 - M. We wear blue.”

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intended as an immunization against delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership for children in the years immediately before the prime ages for introduction into gangs and delinquent behavior” (G.R.E.A.T. n.d.).

<sup>70</sup> In this instance Skinny is speaking of the original Mexican Mafia, founded in San Quentin Prison in California in the 1960s (Irwin 1980).

“So, what are you seeing here in Phoenix? Is the Eme laying it down on the street?”

“You know, I’ve been here for two years and I’m still trying to figure out how the politics work. I don’t know exactly how it goes here. Like I said, I’ve taken a step back now that I have my family. I haven’t done time here in Arizona, so I don’t know what exactly to expect if I were to go back [to prison]. I’ve heard that some of the things are different. The Chicanos here apparently beef with the *paisas* and the Califas<sup>71</sup> and [the *paisas* and Califas] ride together. I don’t know if that’s still true or what. But I’m trying to figure it all out for myself in case I end up going back [to prison] here.”

“Why is it so hard to figure it all out here?”

“I’m telling you, man, you just don’t see so much out on the street like you do in California.”

Luis, a former gang member who told me that as a boy he was undaunted by, and even welcomed, the prospect of being incarcerated, offered a simple reason as to what has led to the calming of gang activity on the streets of Phoenix: “Nobody wants to go to prison nowadays. Back in the day, probably nobody cared, like I didn’t care.”

### *THE PRISON GANGS OF ARIZONA*

Though street gangs appear to be declining, there is still a significant presence of security threat groups in the Arizona Prison System. Like Texas, Arizona prison gangs are generally self-segregated by race. The prison gangs which are certified by the Arizona Department of Corrections (n.d.) are the Sureños; Grandel; the Border Brothers; the New and Old Arizona Mexican Mafias, all of which have a primarily Chicano membership; the Aryan Brotherhood, which has a white membership; the Mau Mau, with a black membership; and the Warrior Society and Dine’ Pride, which feature Native American members. My respondents focused on, in order of increasing importance, the Warrior Society and Dine’ Pride, Mau Mau, the Aryan Brotherhood and the New Mexican Mafia, which was often referred to simply as “the Eme.” In addition, respondents indicated that the *paisas*, who don’t organize formally as a group, stick together out of need for protection. Other smaller groups exist as well and may or may

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<sup>71</sup> Gang members of Californian provenance.

not be present on any given prison yard, but they appear to have minimal relative impact in terms of influencing the overall inmate political order.

The groups that feature in the Arizona prison system all have vertical hierarchies; nothing like the Tangos seems to exist. As in Texas, membership of a prison gang is one of choice, but is generally restricted along racial lines. The process of entering a group and progressing up the ranks paralleled the vertical prison gangs in Texas: potential recruits were recruited by their respective prison gangs upon entry and then had to “put in work” in order to progress up. There is a clear hierarchy that exists in each group, though many of the top leaders are locked away in solitary confinement. Nonetheless, each prison gang has individuals who are in charge in the yard, and, in order for a member to climb ranks, the member must earn the approval of these “big homies.”

The prison gangs underwrite the social order of the yards by instituting their rules. Duke summed up the generic rules, those which are generally expected of “standup” inmates, thusly: “You ain’t supposed to be talking to another race. You ain’t supposed to be fucking no faggots, but that’s bullshit; all the heads [of the prison gangs] be fucking faggots anyway. You ain’t supposed to do drugs. Don’t be talking to police more than two minutes, unless you got somebody with you. It’s just common sense stuff.”

Historically, as was the case in California and in Texas, the reason prisoners formed prison gangs in Arizona was for protection against the prison administration and against each other. Breeze said that groups formed and made a collective effort to fight against the prison administration’s attempts to take away privileges, such as weights on the yard and care packages from home. Regarding inter-racial violence, most former inmates, regardless of their race, reported the segregation imposed by the unwritten rules of the prison yard and spoke of a need to protect one’s own in the event of a prison riot, or against predatory inmates, generally speaking. Nonetheless, these types of violent events and threats were seldom brought up in my conversations with former inmates.

In Arizona, there appears to be less conflict among groups of the same race as a result of the dominance of particular prison gangs or the need to band together due to the lack of strength in numbers for smaller groups. For instance, Native American groups were viewed as non-players in the broader prison social order; they kept to themselves and avoided the broader politics of the prison yard. “The Hopi and the

Navajo hang out,” explained Dru, an Apache who had done time in several prisons throughout the state. “They don’t mess around. They stick to themselves completely.”

Duke spoke about the disparate African American groups, which would sometimes fight with each other but would come together as a function of the social order of prison if a bigger problem, such as a riot, occurred: “Race mattered a lot, rest assured. [...I rolled with the Southside.] If two black dudes got into it, one of them from the Southside, one of them from the Westside, I was on the Southside’s side. That was just mandatory though. But [African Americans were] under the same umbrella, regardless, but there was circles within circles.”

Ryan, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, described an attempt by some white boys from Mesa to start their own branch of AB in the joint: “We used to call them a ‘sisterhood.’ It was like a Mesa clique that tried to come in, but we stomped them out. I mean, you got to stomp shit like that out quick. You can’t let no one else have your piece of the pie.” That being said, other groups were tolerated so long as they didn’t challenge the existing power structure: “Hell’s Angels, Dirty Diapers, Dirty Dozen – all those dudes, when they hit the penitentiary, they shut up. They don’t say shit because [Aryan Brotherhood is] running the show [for the whites].”

The Mexican Mafia is the only group that has a history of a successful, significant contestation of the existing order, something which has happened twice. In the early 1980s, the original Arizona Mexican Mafia faced internal challenges leading to a fractioning of the group into the “Old Eme” and the “New Eme” (Fischer 2001). For a time, both organizations maintained their vertically-organized leadership structures, which helped ensure that start-up organizations could not take hold, and transplants, that is gangs that came into the system because members from other states were being incarcerated in Arizona, could not influence prison’s social order. Nonetheless, according to multiple respondents, the New Eme came to dominate Chicano prison life, causing the Old Eme to become a small organization, populated largely by older members who are serving long sentences, often in administrative segregation.

Linus, a man who chose to stay unaffiliated while serving his time in prison, described the split: “The New Mexican Mafia, they put a stop to a lot of the Old Mexican Mafia rules and [no more raping and killing people in prison] was one of them. And a lot of the Old Mexican Mafia used to bully the youngsters. The youngsters took over. There’s more youngsters than OGs now. So these youngsters put a stop to it. There’s a New Eme. They said, ‘No more.’ [...] Now the youngsters are bullying the OGs,

you know; but in a certain way. They don't go around beating them up or nothing; but they let them know, 'This is our shit. You kick back and you follow our rules.'"

That status quo was in effect for the better part of twenty years. But in the early 2000s, the New Eme faced a challenge from within, characterized by an internal power struggle to control the business on the yard.

"There's been a lot of fights and battles," said Victor who was a soldier for the Eme. "It's not all candies and roses. It's not. You know? It's all about... When it really comes down to it, it's all about money. It's all about money. I have a lot of love for them. You know, they're my brothers and we've did so much; but when it really comes down to it, it's about the money. They could give a fuck about [you.] Really, you're just another part. You know what I mean? That's all it really is. [Gang members] don't see the inside like that; but once you're [in prison], it's not a pretty sight." In other words, the social order in prison is based upon the ability to control the drug trade within the prison walls, which has become their *raison d'être* in recent years, marking a shift from controlling politics on the street to focusing on the politics of prison.

### **Money Makes the Yard Go 'Round**

The prison administration in Arizona had attempted to reduce the influence of prison gangs within the prison system by placing validated prison gang members in the "Special Management Unit II" (Fischer 2001), which is solitary confinement. By locking confirmed prison gang members into solitary confinement, the prison administration was attempting to wrest back a degree of control that it had ceded as such organizations grew within the prison system. However, unlike the Tangos in Texas, the prison gangs of Arizona did not respond by eschewing the traditional vertically configured prison gang for a horizontal model. Instead, the prison gangs changed their overt behaviour; they began to conceal their actions from view of the prison administrators.

One immediate behavioural change involved the practice of tattooing for rank and association, which is now done clandestinely or not at all: "All my work – my 'Pride,' my eagle, my bolts, swastika – it's all on one arm. It's all out there to see," explained Ryan as he showed me his AB related tattoos, most of which he received some twenty or more years ago. "Now they hide everything. [... Do you see how] I got the American flag and the Arizona flag behind a chain link fence? [Today, they might] hide AB within that somehow. You know what I'm saying? Try to disguise it. Before, like we used to put it on our chest, big ol' fucking – like Aryan Barbarian's got it tattooed across his back

‘Aryan Barbarian.’ You’d never do that now because you’d just go to the hole and stay there until you get released. If you’re doing 10 years, 20 years, fuck that. The hole’s the most horrible thing you could do to a person because it’s just ... your whole world is that TV, nothing else. [...] I mean every show, you just become a part of the show in your life because that’s your reality. You don’t come out of your cell. I mean, it’s just a horrible existence.”

Raúl, who was an esquina for the Eme, a man who was associated with but did not climb the ranks of the prison gang, discussed how difficult it was for any gang to engage in the process of authorizing violence and committing that violence, which underwrote a gang’s authority: “Now there’s really no control because they’re all locked down, bro. There’s no movement because [the big homies are] all locked up behind cell doors. Yeah, you can say, ‘Hey, I want this yard to go off over here because they’re fucking up,’ or ‘The white boys are fucking up. You know what? Let’s fuck up the white boys. Let’s go have a riot.’ That shit happens a lot, yeah; but as far as the Eme controlling, nah. They’re not. Not even the AB, not even the Crips or nothing. There’s nobody in control no more, man. It’s so tight. Locked down so tight. [... Only if] you’re getting information from somebody that’s in the hole [...], then that’s how shit’s getting taken care of. As far as [the guys in solitary] sending words out here [to the street]? Nah.”

With the prison administration reasserting its presence within the social order of prison, prison gangs’ members minimized behaviours which would lead to their being classified as STGs and placed into solitary confinement. Instead, they focused on becoming consistent and clandestine players in the illicit drug trade within the prison walls (although they simultaneously maintained the rhetoric of protection to incoming inmates). “Pretty much [for] every prison gang, it’s about the money,” explained Breeze. “It’s all a numbers game and it’s all a money hustle game,” Ryan said. “The more dudes [a boss has on his] side to push stamps<sup>72</sup>, to push store<sup>73</sup>, dope, drugs, whatever, the more money *that* dude makes, supposedly for the dudes in lockdown.”

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<sup>72</sup> At the time of Ryan’s incarceration, stamps were used as currency among inmates.

<sup>73</sup> Inmates who could afford it would often buy products from the prison commissary and keep them on hand, selling them on credit to their peers who may not have had enough money to purchase such items when the prison commissary was open.

Making money certainly wasn't just the white man's hustle. Victor explained that within the segregated norms of the prison social order, it was okay to deal with other races: "[I]f you want to go outside of your race, then it's just for money purposes. You know? And that can stop at any moment. You have to be a little bit more cautious. You bump the prices up outside of your race. If they don't... Say you sell something to another race – whether it be a white, black, or Native – if they don't pay in a certain amount of time, there's no ifs, ands, or buts, that timeline, it's to be dealt with." To that end, Duke explained that "every time a conflict [between prison gangs occurs, it] always [has] to do with drugs, always comes back to drugs because most of the head guys, [...] they're drug users."

Every respondent reported the presence of drugs in prison and every respondent pointed to a prison gang – or the *paisas* – as the organization that was bringing the drugs in, to varying degrees. With the drug trade in action behind the prison walls, the prisoners still rely on the old hierarchical structures to resolve disputes. Being in control of the drug trade is power; however, those in charge no longer are necessarily overt, ranking members, given the propensity of such people to be thrown into solitary confinement. Instead, those who have power are those who are able to facilitate the entry of drugs given the constraints of prison.

Former inmates say that despite the prison administration's focus on prison gangs, they still allow a certain segregation and hierarchizing to occur among the inmates as a means to maintain order. "We keep order in there by our hierarchy," explained Wrangler. "[The prison administrators] allow hierarchy to a certain extent because we keep order for the prison. The prison guards can't keep order in prison. There is no way. You look at the numbers of how many criminals are in [and understand] that [the inmates] could take the prison at any given time."

In short, the prison administration has forced the existing prison gangs to change their outward appearance within the prison, becoming more clandestine and less violent. However, the hierarchical arrangements which have historically been in place have not been challenged by the prison administration to the point of destroying prison gangs, as all respondents reported their existence. Moreover, these prison gangs have a reason for existing, and that reason is to make money from the drug trade, which appears to be pervasive within the prison system. That the prison administration has reasserted control over the prison yard should be taken with caution since it may have only forced a reconfiguration of the inmate's ways of instituting social order.



*BETWEEN LA CALLE AND LA PINTA*

The amount of influence that prison gangs have on the street differs greatly. Many of the non-Chicano prison gangs have only a presence in prison. For instance, Dru told me that the Warrior Society does not appear on the reservation: “That's only a prison thing.” Duke told me that the Mau Maus are an umbrella organization that keeps disparate groups together inside prison, while, on the outside, they are nothing compared to the individual street gangs and, as such, have little influence on street politics. Ryan and Wrangler indicated that the lack of white street gangs was a qualitative difference for AB compared to Hispanic prison gangs; the primary street-level organizations were outlaw motor cycle gangs, like the Hells Angels, whose business interests lead them to eschew a lot of the white supremacist rhetoric in order to maintain cordial relationships with other gangs that supply them with drugs.

Prison gangs that exert on the street are exclusively Chicano, namely the New Mexican Mafia. The Eme's behaviour is one that echoes the traditions of the Hispanic prison gangs of Texas. As is the case in Texas, for the Eme – and Hispanics joining prison gangs generally – membership is, theoretically, for life, with members being obligated to provide for incarcerated members or do their bidding in the free world. Ideally, in the view of the Mexican Mafia, members participate in, and dominate, the drug trade in the free world. Sometimes they use the connections they develop in prison to secure wholesale shipments for local distribution.

According to K.C. Hill, the Mexican Mafia has been trying to unite the Hispanic street gang sets in Arizona, forcing them to “pay tax on whatever their criminal business is.” This strategy is contingent on members of the Eme returning to their old neighbourhoods or establishing a presence in a new one whereby they can impose and collect the taxes. Their presence may become the lynchpin of the local retail trade in which they provide the street level dealers with product and demand a percentage in exchange for continued support as well as protection, thereby allowing the illicit enterprise to continue unimpeded.

As in Texas, prison gangs' ability to influence street politics is predicated upon the notion that, eventually, everyone involved in the gang will end up in prison or have someone he cares about end up there. Accordingly, prison gangs' influence on the street is a function of the ability to force protection within prison. Influence thus occurs when street gang members need to ensure that protection will be available for them within prison. This influence of the Eme's norms extends to the women's prison as well where the Eme's wishes are enforced by a Chicana shot caller. Adelita fulfilled that role

for many years: “I have more juice with the inmates and the guards than the Warden. With one word, I can bring everything to a halt. It’s appreciated on both sides. Sometimes the guards would come to me to resolve problems. If a chick steps out of line on the outside, word gets sent to me on the inside, and I take care of it when they get sent there. I realized a long time ago that it isn’t what I want to do. It goes against my own code of ethics. But I have fifteen nephews in prison right now. The deal is that I take care of business when asked and that way I know the Eme has my nephews’ back when they go to the men’s prisons.”

Whether or not the Eme is able to control the streets is a matter of contention. Some gang members and police are adamant that the Eme does exert control over the street; others suggest that its control, while it may have once existed, is fading. Commander Tim Hampton explained that the Eme had control in the “early ‘90s. We had gangs killing gangs because they were in their turf. They were committing crimes in their area. [There were] shootings where they were trying to sell drugs in their area and that was typical of all around the nation. Again, [the Phoenix Police Department] put an enormous amount of people in prison. Since that time, they’ve kind of just, they’re there, but they’re not attempting to control as much as they have in the past.”

Commander Baker spoke about what the contemporary Eme presence on the street is: “We have a unit that only focuses on the Eme and that’s because they do have a presence. It is a group that is very violent and ruthless. They influence street gangs, but to what extent they manage them – they don’t manage them; they intimidate them into doing what they want sometimes. I don’t give them much credit. There might be certain individuals who have pull, but, as a group, they’re not that organized.”

The lack of organization and discipline was a theme broached by other respondents, too. For example, Raúl lamented the Eme’s failure to persuade young street gang members to contribute to the welfare of those who are locked up: “Right here on the street? Well, people really aren’t too scared of [the Eme]. [... They’re] nobody out here. You know what I mean? We – the ones that been locked up – we know what’s going on. We know we can come out here and tell these youngsters, ‘Hey, dude, you got to respect what’s going on in there, man, because them dudes are fighting for you guys in there. When you guys go in there, you guys can live a comfortable life in there.’” For many, it’s a message that lands on deaf ears.

Luis likewise contested the notion that the Eme “controlled” street gangs, saying that the lack of control was due to the failure of members to stay on the street

when they are released from prison: “When they would come out, they would all usually go back in.” Victor said that the Eme does have the problem that, in some neighbourhoods, contact has been lost and taxation doesn’t occur. Part of the problem is geographical, noted Lieutenant Thomas: “There are so many different entities that are bringing dope into the Valley that it would be difficult for anybody to be able to say, ‘Okay, once this dope crosses the threshold of the city of Phoenix, we control it.’ It’s just really difficult to do that. Geographically, our city is so spread out that you can’t even maintain a grip on a particular portion of the city.”

Nonetheless, the Eme does what it can to generate revenue.

### **Unlikely Bedfellows: Cooperating on the Outside**

The race politics of prison do not transfer to the street; there is no room for conflict when money is at stake. The policy of sticking with one’s own is in effect for the most intimate relationships, but business is business, and violence, when it brings unwanted police attention, is bad for business. Many law enforcement personnel spoke of how the relationships between opposing prison groups was one of business in the free world.

“[The Aryan Brotherhood will] be associated with white supremacist groups [in their day-to-day lives in the free world], but you’ll just as readily find an Aryan Brotherhood member working in conjunction with a Hispanic because it’s a dope connection,” explained K.C. Hill. “And they might hang out together and party together because he’s white supremacist in prison, but he may not necessarily hold true to those beliefs on the outside.”

Lieutenant Lauri Burgett whose assignments through her police career led her to see several aspects of the drug trade described an informant she once had who progressed up the ranks. When she caught up with him ten years after she had worked as a narc, he was a full-fledged “Mexican Mafia [member] who was dealing dope with a white motorcycle gang.”

Commander Tim Hampton described the Mexican Mafia as forward-thinking in its efforts to diversify where business partners are concerned: “They are smarter. Absolutely. Actually they work with the Aryan Brotherhood, if you can believe that. Who would have ever saw that one coming or [that the Mexican Mafia would] actually work with the Dirty Dozen and the Hells Angels?” Moreover, echoing what others, who had been part of the drug trade, had said, Commander Hampton noted how criminal groups have undertaken measures to reduce violence and minimize attention, by

punishing those in the areas they do control for behaving in ways that bring police attention: "It's a business decision. [If the police are] taking out all of the connections and the lieutenants, the hierarchy and all the people who make you money because they keep getting arrested, then [those people are giving] the organization no value. So, at that point, [those people] are subject to discipline."

#### *BUSINESS BRINGS RELATIVE CALM*

With money in the balance, it appears that most of the actors involved in the drug trade prefer to keep a low profile and avoid intergroup violence or violence that results in innocent victims. Violent acts like drive-by shootings are almost unheard of. According to police and gang members alike, this relative calm is in contrast to the *modus operandi* for street gangs during their heyday of the late 1980s and early 1990s. As business becomes the focus of street and prison gangs, violence appears to be discouraged in day-to-day activities. Nonetheless, there are the notable exceptions of the rip crews which target traffickers and their stash houses, breaking into properties and taking the illicit booty to be resold at great profit.

Occasionally, there is still gang-related violence. While I was conducting my fieldwork, Carmencita's brother was gunned down. The members of her gang were hot for justice, and violence was promised, though I never found out if it was ever delivered. Some respondents said that intra-gang violence, designed to keep members in line, would occur. Lil G, who worked as muscle for the Eme, spoke of an attempt by a rival faction of the Mexican Mafia to extort him as he ran a drug house, something that his seniority should have allowed him to do without disturbance. Breeze and Duke both spoke of violence being contracted out to rival factions to control rogue members who might be out of reach for intra-gang discipline.

Remarkably, no prison-based organization appears to have clear dominance over the street market nor the wholesale market in Greater Phoenix, which is in sharp contrast to the market dynamics of El Paso. While certain neighbourhoods may be influenced by the Mexican Mafia, the whole of Greater Phoenix is certainly not. Accordingly, the protection market that exists within the criminal underworld is one which is less robust than the one in Texas. Prison gangs cannot consistently impose their will on street gangs. Plus, the reduction of visibility in the drug trade, even at the street level, with many drug transactions moving from the street corner to someone's house, has offered a layer of protection against incarceration. The reduction of visibility, coupled with the apparent decline of street gangs, undermines the idea that prison is

inevitable for those who are involved in the criminal underworld, particularly when those activities are centred on the drug trade. In sum, these characteristics of the Phoenix underworld result in a reduction of the Mexican Mafia's ability to influence the street's politics.

Drug use remains a problem in the city, and if the number of people wandering the downtown streets in search of drugs is any indication (along with the official reports), then the drug trade remains a lucrative business. To that end, most people who fall victim to crime in Phoenix fall victim to non-violent crimes, such as home invasions, which my respondents – police and gang members alike – said were often undertaken by those who are desperate for the funds necessary to support their drug habits.

Ultimately, the idea of “criminal control” appears to refer to degree of monopolization in a particular market in a particular place, such as the wholesale market in Phoenix, and is language that gets used by police, the press, and then picked up by the public with a connotation that the whole neighbourhood has gone to hell. I came to this realization when I fell victim to a home invasion. The officer who responded to the scene told me: “You know what, I don't think you know what kind of neighbourhood you live in. This neighbourhood is *controlled* by a street gang. The gang in this area is Barrio Trece Cuatro. If I had to guess, I bet this is one of their jobs.”

After the incident, I walked my neighbourhood for a few evenings and talked to whomever I saw. Some people thought that my stuff might surface in the contraband markets run by the local gang, but others were sceptical, attributing home invasions in the neighbourhood to “lerpers,” meth addicts who steal. I even tried to get in touch with whomever was selling stolen goods in the area to see if I could buy my computer back, but to no avail. Adelita was upset that I had been hit and assured me that if her people had controlled the neighbourhood, my stuff would have been returned to me. For her, control meant that the Eme was aware of the kinds of activities being undertaken in its own neighbourhood and that tax was being paid to the Eme with a portion of the proceeds generated by the gangs by those activities. She felt that it would be unusual for a gang that controlled the neighbourhood to rob from one of its residents because you quite simply do not shit where you eat.

Whatever “control” is in the criminal context vis-à-vis a place, it does not affect residents' day-to-day lives; I never saw violence happening in my neighbourhood, and nobody who lived there lived scared. No one spoke of any underlying threat. Kids

played in the street, and people hung out on their porches in the evening when the heat broke enough to make such activities bearable. Though the neighbourhood's appearance was blighted by a shell of a burnt down house, there were no bullet holes, much less sounds of gunshots to be heard, in the streets around my house.



Photo 11: My room was tossed by the burglars. They took almost everything of value.

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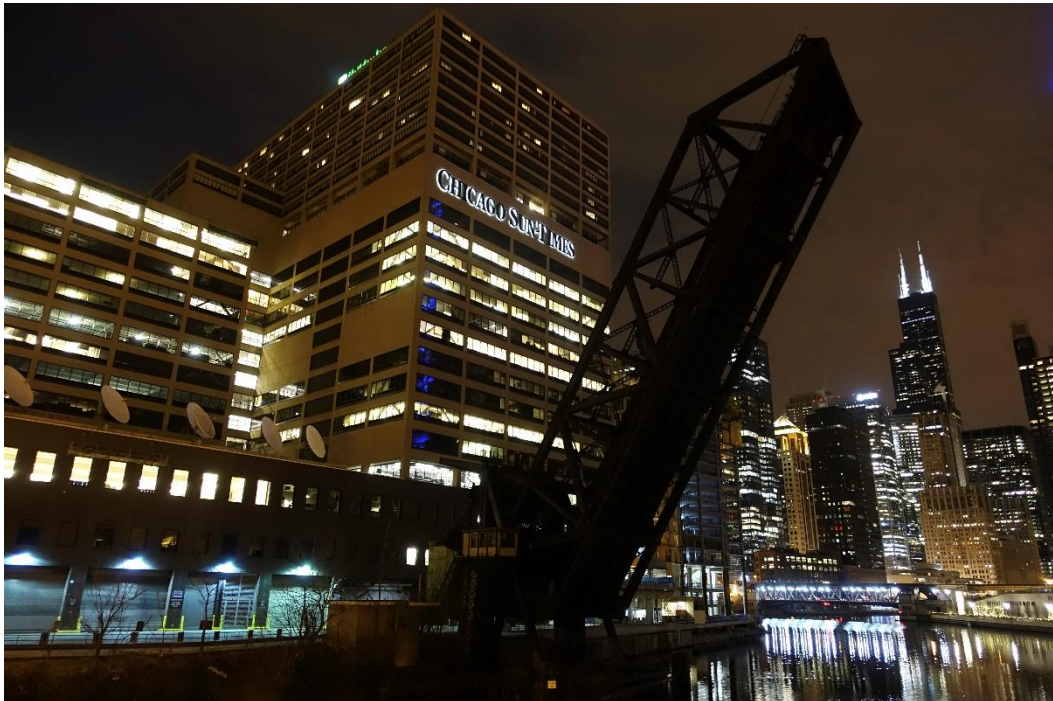
As the summer came to an end, I left Phoenix and drove north-east, crossing over the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and then on through the utter flatness of the Great Plains of Nebraska and Iowa. Along the way I stopped to visit José Rivera, perhaps the only original Barrio Azteca member who currently lives outside of prison. I found him living in a sleepy Midwestern town, with his wife and daughter, in a lovely house built out of a converted shipping container. Even in small town America, José knows that there are opportunities to sell drugs or engage in some other illicit activity. But he doesn't. With *la vida loca* – the crazy life – long behind him, he now works as a roofer, making sure prison is a thing of the past. A few days later, I set off for my home state of Illinois with the goal of gaining some insight into the chaos of Chicago's gangs.

## IV: MAKING IT IN THE MARGINS

## CHICAGO: THE BIG CITY

### *CHICAGOLAND*

I have always enjoyed driving into Chicago at night and seeing its sparkling, big-city skyline. The dark silhouettes of towering skyscrapers and high-rise condominiums, with their windows illuminated haphazardly, are backlit by the dull glow of street lights. With some of the tallest buildings in the world, including the Sears Tower<sup>74</sup> and the John Hancock Building, the Chicago skyline is an impressive scene, especially for a kid who grew up downstate in the midst of corn and soybean fields that extended for as far as the eye can see.



**Photo 12: The Chicago Sun Times building (foreground); the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower; background, right of the draw bridge.)**

Chicago is big in every way imaginable. The greater Chicago area, sometimes referred to as Chicagoland, is expansive, covering nearly 11,000 square miles, and spreads beyond the north-eastern corner of Illinois into parts of two other states: Indiana, and Wisconsin (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). The metro area has a population of

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<sup>74</sup> The Sears Tower was renamed the Willis Tower in 2009. Many people who grew up with the building as “the Sears Tower” continue to refer to it as such.



nearly 10 million people, with the city proper accounting for 2.7 million of that total. For the time being, given that its population is stagnating, Chicago is the third largest city in the country (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Chicago has it all: restaurants, shopping, music, and museums. The city is so large that every time I visit, there is something new or different to see, do, or experience, but it is so vast that it feels as if everything is at least a half hour drive away at any given point in time.

Ethnic enclaves are spread throughout the city. One can pass through the ornate Chinatown Gate on Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road for excellent Chinese food or bubble tea; visit Taylor Street, home to the city's Little Italy – one of the Outfit's<sup>75</sup> old haunts (Lombardo 2013) – to eat at one of the many Italian restaurants; call into Bridgeport, a traditionally Irish neighbourhood on the city's south side, where five of Chicago's mayors grew up (LockZero.org n.d.); or stop by one of the neighbourhoods that feature Indian, Polish<sup>76</sup>, and Mexican stores and restaurants, populations which, in ascending order, are currently the three most significant foreign-born populations in the city (Paral 2003).

I chose to live in the old Polish downtown area during my fieldwork. It was a far cry from the areas in which I had lived during my stays in El Paso and Phoenix. My choice of neighbourhood had been carefully deliberated. After having been burgled in Phoenix, I was left rattled. Plus, having grown up in Illinois, I had heard nothing but negative stories about the rough parts of Chicago and, recently, there had been an uptick in violence. Unlike the southwest, drive-by shootings are not a thing of the past in Chicago. While I am sure that living outside of the rough ends affected my ability to network, by living with my college buddy, Neema, a lifelong Chicago resident, I was able to access social capital that I didn't have in the other sites.

My neighbourhood was clean and safe, with four storey apartment buildings that were once single family houses. Neema explained that ten years earlier, the neighbourhood was rough and violent. A few relics from that time, such as graffiti markings at the bus stop and a gang symbol carved into the cement as it dried, remain.

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<sup>75</sup> The Chicago Outfit is Chicago's iteration of the Italian Mafia. It was initially based in Chicago's South Side and rose to power in the prohibition era of the 1920s under the leadership of Johnny Torrio and Al Capone.

<sup>76</sup> Admittedly, the Polish presence of the city is fading as the Poles are increasingly moving to the suburbs, resulting in the closure of several of the stores and markets that used to dot the traditionally Polish neighbourhoods.

Today, the neighbourhood is home to a mix of people; one of the areas in Chicago that does appear truly cosmopolitan. Our block was home to families of all colours and several nationalities. The area is continuing to be gentrified; it is filled with middle class families who worry that soon they won't be able to afford living there anymore: as property values increase, so too does their rent.

In contrast to the old Polish parts of Chicago, the Mexican parts of town continue to have a decidedly Mexican identity, given that the Hispanic population has been growing annually and has contributed to the maintenance of the city's food and cultural traditions (Lee 2016, U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Pilsen, in spite of the neighbourhood's Czech name, is a Mexican/ Mexican-American area where tacos, carnitas, and all kinds of typical Mexican food, comparable in taste and quality to that in Juárez, can be had. Like Pilsen, Little Village is another growing, heavily Mexican/ Mexican-American neighbourhood that was once the home of the eastern Europeans who came to Chicago in earlier years. Unlike the old Polish parts of Chicago, parts of these neighbourhoods are known for a continued gang presence which I was able to observe when Mateo invited me to join him. Mateo serves as a "violence interrupter" – a former gang member whose job involves mitigating situations where violence has been used historically to respond to conflict. Mateo invited me to explore the neighbourhood and to meet various members of the 2-6 clique he was assigned to.

#### *CHICAGO AS A "SOCIAL LABORATORY"*

The European migrants who populated the slums of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicago were the focus of the studies published by ground-breaking sociologists, including W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1919) as well as Ernest Burgess and Robert Park (1928, 1921), all colleagues at the University of Chicago. The success of these scholars and those who followed in their footsteps brought attention to the ethnographical methods and interpretations which underpin what has become known as the "Chicago School" of sociology. In addition, the success and influence of these Chicago School studies promoted the city's status as an important "social laboratory" where complex social interactions could be readily observed (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008, Skogan 2006). Accordingly, Chicago has been the site of numerous studies undertaken, regarding issues of poverty (Zorbaugh 1929, Abbott 1936), community (Horowitz 1983, Suttles 1968, Seligman 2005, Sampson 2012), and crime and crime responses (Hagedorn 2015, Lombardo 2013, Hagedorn 2006, Haller 1970, Thrasher 1927 [1963], Landesco 1932,

Venkatesh 2008, Skogan 2006), among many other topics of sociological and criminological interest.

Though “the Chicago School highlighted the importance of structure and ecology in the making of the modern American city” (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008, 3), that Chicago is representative of “the modern American city” and the criminological problems that characterize it should be questioned. While Chicago has been used time and time again as a sociological laboratory, the many lessons that have been learned are not necessarily applicable to other big-city contexts. As Paulina, a woman who worked for the Chicago HIDTA, and who was previously stationed in the Atlanta office, quipped, “Chicago is a whole different animal,” in terms of identifying problems and solutions vis-à-vis the drug trade. In other words, while most large cities experience general problems which are applicable to all large cities, each city faces problems which are distinctly its own.

Chicago stands apart from El Paso and Phoenix, not only in magnitude but also in terms of history, demographics, and crime. Its sheer size made it a difficult place to study. With one exception, to meet a high-up member of the Black P. Stone Nation, I focused my efforts on the city proper. Given the vast amount of research that has been undertaken in this social laboratory, a lot of work exists which provides the context and depth of Chicago gang life. Simply put, being a place where crime, particularly that which relates to gangs, has been studied, Chicago is an important point of comparison when studying the issues of gangs, the drug trade, and international drug trafficking. Though negotiating access in Chicago proved to be difficult, the differences that I observed between Chicago and El Paso and Phoenix were important. To truly appreciate the differences, it’s necessary to understand a bit about Chicago’s history.

#### *THE UNDERPINNINGS OF “GANGLAND”*

To explore the drug trade in Chicago and the people and organizations involved in it, one must understand the complex and intertwining histories of migration, discrimination, machine politics, and crime within Chicago. These histories serve as the basis upon which gangs were once formed within the city, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continue to affect the evolution of Chicago’s gangs and criminal entrepreneurs. Though sociologist Frederic Thrasher (1927 [1963]) deemed Chicago “Gangland” in his classic study of gangs in the city, he – like most of the Chicago School sociologists of the

era – minimized the role of race<sup>77</sup>, focusing on the disputes between the Italian, Irish, Jewish, and Polish youth groups that he observed throughout the city. Nonetheless, perhaps the most critical history to understanding the development of Chicago’s gangs, and, to a lesser extent, organized crime, is the one of discrimination which has existed in Chicago in one form or another for much of the city’s existence (Hagedorn 2006).

Chicago has a longstanding history of migration. Less than seventy years after Baptiste Point De Saible, a black Haitian frontiersman, first settled the area in 1779, Chicago became an important transportation hub and a significant receptor city of immigrants (Asbury 2003). By 1870, nearly half of the city’s denizens were foreign born (Paral 2003). The employment opportunities, including the infamous meat packing plants described in Upton Sinclair’s (1981 [1906]) *The Jungle*; the rural areas with the farmland the “old country” lacked; and the different communities that migrants could, and still can, plug into directly; along with the promise of upward mobility, have drawn millions of migrants, both nationally and internationally, for nearly two centuries.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, European immigrants flowed into Chicago to work in the city’s emerging legitimate industries (Paral 2003). But, Chicago, being the crossroads of America, was also a magnet for illicit enterprise. “Armies of gamblers and prostitutes and the burgeoning ranks of concert saloons, massage parlors, and other illicit entertainments” sprung up to cater for the men who were traversing the city in its early days (Asbury 2003, xvi). Historian Mark Haller (1970) noted that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “not a single leader [of Chicago-area criminal organizations] was recorded as native white American of native born stock.”

The new European arrivals of the late 1800s and early 1900s formed the initial underclass of Chicago’s society, and were often viewed as flawed. Even Jane Addams, who famously took immigrants in at Hull House to integrate them into society, was critical of Italians and other immigrant communities she considered inferior<sup>78</sup>. The

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<sup>77</sup> Though Americans could not choose their own race in census measurements until 1960, several racial categories were available during Thrasher’s study period, including White, Black, Mulatto, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and Hindu (Pew Research Center 2015). Thrasher focused purely on white people, despite the noted and tracked presence of non-white people.

<sup>78</sup> In *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Jane Addams wrote: “A South Italian peasant who has picked olives and packed oranges from his toddling babyhood cannot see at once the difference between the outdoor healthy work which he had performed in the varying seasons, and the long

outbreak of World War I slowed European migration to Chicago. Then, between 1915 and 1950, the “Great Migration” brought African Americans to the city (Lombardo 2013), making them the city’s new whipping boys (Hagedorn 2006). Though a significant proportion of the “six million African Americans [who] left their homes in the South and moved to states in the North and West” during the “Great Migration” came to Chicago (Layson and Warren 2013, Gosnell 1933), the primary receptor communities consisted of only three neighbourhoods: Douglas, Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park. These three neighbourhoods were in the heart of the area known as the “Black Belt,” an area where the African American population of Chicago was concentrated due to restrictive covenants and the measures undertaken by white gangs to prevent African Americans from moving into white neighbourhoods (Drake and Cayton 1970, McClelland 2013, Massey and Denton 1993, Hagedorn 2006).

After World War II, the courts struck down restrictive covenants that had prohibited African Americans from living in most neighbourhoods in Chicago, paving the way for “diversification” (McClelland 2013). Nonetheless, overt violence directed towards African Americans, discrimination, and de facto segregation, often through discriminatory Chicago Housing Authority policies, were still the order of the day (Seligman 2005). When African Americans finally were able to move to other parts of

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hours of monotonous factory life which his child encounters when he goes to work in Chicago. An Italian father came to us in great grief over the death of his eldest child, a little girl of twelve, who had brought the largest wages into the family fund. In the midst of his genuine sorrow he said: ‘She was the oldest kid I had. Now I shall have to go back to work again until the next one is able to take care of me.’ The man was only thirty-three and had hoped to retire from work at least during the winters. No foreman cared to have him in a factory, untrained and unintelligent as he was. It was much easier for his bright, English-speaking little girl to get a chance to paste labels on a box than for him to secure an opportunity to carry pig iron. The effect on the child was what no one concerned thought about, in the abnormal effort she made thus prematurely to bear the weight of life. Another little girl of thirteen, a Russian-Jewish child employed in a laundry at a heavy task beyond her strength, committed suicide, because she had borrowed three dollars from a companion which she could not repay unless she confided the story to her parents and gave up an entire week’s wages—but what could the family live upon that week in case she did!” (Addams 1910, 199).

This passage belies the fact that Italian men were brought from Italy to work in highly dangerous construction projects where men died on a daily basis because it was cheaper to replace them than enact safety measures. She attacks other ethnic groups as well, especially those who are not ‘white’ enough for her. In these examples, one must wonder why Addams doesn’t question why children were being exploited by the industrialists of the day and why adult men were being denied the right to work. (Thanks to Isobel Scavetta for pointing this out to me.)

the city, white families eventually abandoned these neighbourhoods (Skogan 2006), meaning that little integration occurred and the city remained largely segregated. This white flight is a clear example of “spatial separation reinforced by homophily, or the tendency of people to choose to live near like others on valued characteristics, and distant from those disvalued” (Sampson 2012, 374). Consequently, despite their attempt to move to “better neighbourhoods,” white flight kept African Americans in lower social positions.

The *de facto* segregation was so significant that in 1966 the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr “captured national headlines when he moved into a dingy West Side apartment to protest housing discrimination and to shine a spotlight on the dismal living conditions of the poor. He participated in two dramatic marches through all-white neighborhoods, appealing to Mayor [Richard J.] Daley<sup>79</sup> to reform the discriminatory housing practices all across Chicago” (Holt and Brooks 2010).

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, non-white immigrants began to come to the city after the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965<sup>80</sup> which outlawed the preference for white immigrants that had been in effect since 1790 (Chin 1996). Asian and Hispanic communities began to grow. The continued growth of the Mexican communities in Chicago is one of the few sources of population growth for a city that is struggling to maintain its population (Lee 2016). Nonetheless, although people of different European roots now live together, the city has failed to achieve any significant level of integration. Despite being home to an increasing array of ethnic populations and having an equitable split of major ethnic groups, with whites forming 45% of the city’s population and African American and Hispanic populations each making up nearly one third of the city’s population in the mid-2010s (U.S. Census Bureau 2016), Chicago remains one of the most segregated cities in the United States (McClelland 2013, Fessenden and Park 2016). Demographers Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) describe the isolation felt by each neighbourhood from other communities as having increased throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>79</sup> Richard J. Daley (1902-1976) was mayor of Chicago from 1955 until his death. His son, Richard M. Daley (b. 1942), was mayor of Chicago from 1989 until 2011.

<sup>80</sup> H.R. 2580; Pub.L. 89–236, 79 Stat. 911, enacted June 30, 1968.

Moreover, despite the diversification of the city's residents, there are "three distinct Chicagos" with white, black, and Latino people often living apart with little intermingling (Skogan 2006, 21). This degree of segregation led the Chicago police to stop me as I walked down the road in a west Chicago, primarily African American, neighbourhood. I was "too white" for the neighbourhood. For the cops who stopped me, my presence could be explained only by a desire to buy drugs. It was a unique experience for me; never before nor since has my being not dark enough been a problem.

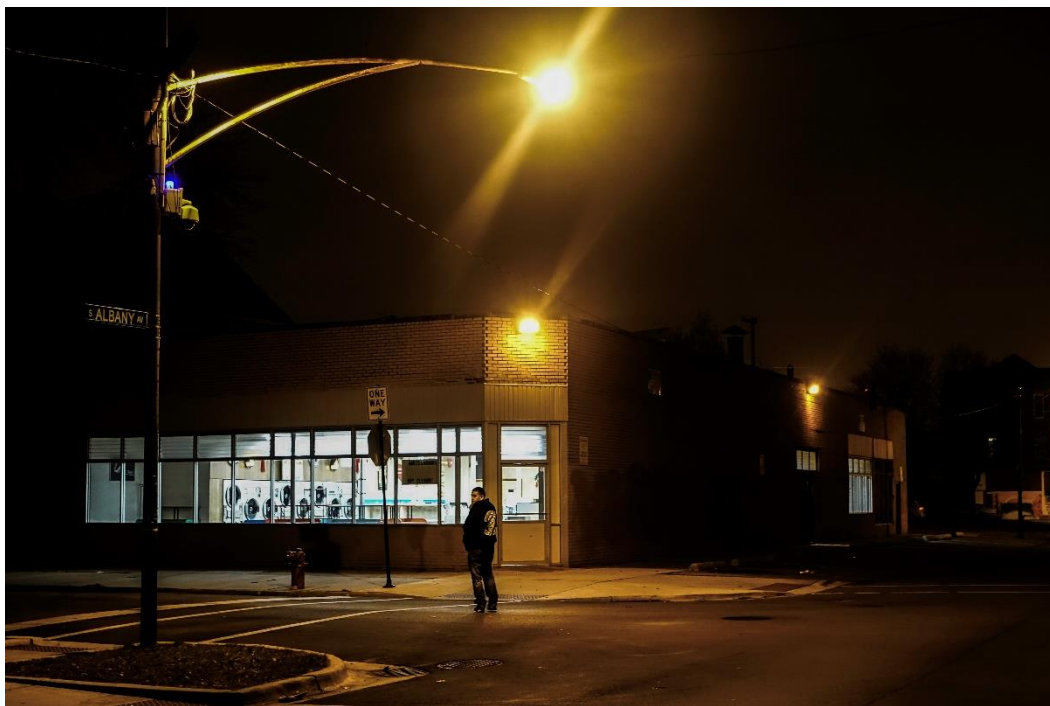
The imagery of Chicago tells two tales. There is the Chicago of the towering, ritzy buildings, which house Fortune 500 companies or wealthy socialites; fancy, Michelin-starred restaurants; hipster donut stalls; gentrifying neighbourhoods, and the expensive wares of glitzy stores on the Magnificent Mile of Michigan Avenue. Standing in stark contrast to the Chicago of wealth is the city's underbelly, some of which is literally underground, in the access tunnels below the street level of Michigan Avenue, where homeless people and drug users take shelter from the bitter wind and cold. The underbelly once included the now demolished notorious high-rise housing projects which Venkatesh (2008) visited. Those high-density projects, which housed thousands of poor, mostly African American people, in areas of Chicago which historically had been slums, are no longer. In 1998, nearly 19,000 of the underfunded and poorly maintained buildings failed viability inspection, meaning that under federal law the



Photo 13: An encampment underneath Michigan Avenue.

Chicago Housing Authority had to demolish the units within five years (Popkin and Cunningham 2002). The 2000s saw the demolition of these buildings, the last of which, the Cabrini-Green housing project, was brought down in 2012 (Austen 2012). Several<sup>81</sup> of the people who once lived in those cramped conditions were displaced throughout the city (Sampson 2012).

Today, the underbelly is characterized by the crumbling neighbourhoods where some of the poorest of Chicago's inhabitants live in the south and west sides. Here, neighbourhoods include boarded up brick buildings, houses in various states of disrepair, and walls marred by graffiti and bullet holes, reminders of the continued violence which scars those areas, despite the statistics showing a relative decrease since the 1990s (U.S. Census Bureau 2016, Sampson 2012). There is a clear division between the areas of the haves and the have nots, which is typically – though not always – split along neighbourhoods' dominant ethnic identities.



**Photo 14: Mateo, a Violence Interrupter, walks the street of a neighbourhood with a high gang presence. Bullet holes are in the window frames of the laundromat. There is a police camera, with its flashing blue light, to monitor the corner.**

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<sup>81</sup> About 56 percent of the at least 53,900 remained in the system and were displaced within the CHA; the other 44 percent lost contact with the system (Eads, Salinas, and Evans 2014).



Chicago's continued segregation is an important backdrop for the protracted presence of violence (Lee 2016, Fessenden and Park 2016). On the one hand, there is the crime angle whereby the violence has not decreased at the same rate as crime overall in the city (Chicago Tribune 2016), with drive-by shootings continuing to be a problem, in stark contrast to El Paso or Phoenix. The public narrative regarding this visible violence attributes it to Latino and African American street gangs and the scourge of the drug trade which is underwritten by organized criminal actors, typically named as the Sinaloa Cartel. Groups including the Chicago DEA and the Chicago Crime Commission often described the Sinaloa Cartel as possessing a near monopoly of the Chicago drug market (Elgas 2015, Dumke 2014, Lippert, Cattan, and Parker 2013).

On the other hand, there is the policing angle, whereby, given the racial underpinnings of the problematizing of Chicago's ills, communities of colour feel as if the police do their jobs poorly and sometimes unjustly in their neighbourhoods (Skogan 2006). The sense of injustice is particularly present in an era where tensions between minority communities and the police are high, given the raised profile of the killing of unarmed black men throughout the U.S. This issue is especially salient in Chicago, where the city has paid over half a billion dollars to settle police brutality claims, which disproportionately affect African American and Latino communities (Sloan and Strong 2016), and where the international press has exposed the presence of a secret "black site" detention centre at Homan Square where police reportedly beat and tortured suspects (Ackerman 2015). And, while I am not claiming that this police violence is underwritten by organized criminal actors, it is an element of the relationship between the police and the policed; it's a relationship which defines the margins of society and underpins the efforts of some to survive in the margins by any means possible.

#### *A BRIEF HISTORY OF GANGS AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN CHICAGO*

Street gangs and organized criminal organizations have a long history of existing – and being studied – in Chicago (Asbury 2003, Block and Block 1993, Hagedorn 2006, 2015, Haller 1970, Lombardo 2013, Skogan 2006, Thrasher 1927 [1963], Zorbaugh 1929, Venkatesh 2008). The first study of gangs in Chicago, Frederic Thrasher's (1927 [1963])

*The Gang: A study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago*<sup>82</sup> focused on white gangs in marginalized, immigrant communities, including the Jews, Italians, Poles, and the Irish, who were considered to be the biggest players in the criminal underworld for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hagedorn 2006, Lombardo 2013), an unsurprising focus given the predominately white, European-rooted demographics of the city.

While most of the Chicago School operated at a time that saw the rise and fall of Al Capone (1899 - 1947), only sociologist John Landesco (1929, 1932) studied organized crime in the city during this period (Lombardo 2013). Landesco outlined what he deemed to be the kernel of a “gangster’s psychology,” saying that “[u]sually the gangster is brought up in neighborhoods where the gang tradition is old. He grows up into it from early childhood in a world where pilfering, vandalism, sex delinquency and brutality are an inseparable part of his play life. His earliest relation with the law is with the policeman on the beat, who always has something on the little gang, and ‘copper hating’ is the normal attitude” (Landesco 1929, 1043). This statement shows that, like his colleagues of the Chicago School, Landesco viewed the ecology of the city as the chief contributing factor to the fostering of criminal careers. He showed that criminal entrepreneurs were not imported from Italy, as the “alien conspiracy” stereotypes of the times would suggest, but came up from the slums of the city (Landesco 1932, Smith Jr 1975).

That insight – that crime is best fostered within the margins of society – is fundamental to understanding not only the history of organized crime but also the history of gangs in Chicago. As white people of European stock moved out of the marginal neighbourhoods and up in the ranks of society, a new underclass arrived, creating an “ethnic succession” within the criminal underworld which, in Chicago, would eventually include African Americans and Mexican-Americans (Ianni 1974). Some within those newly arrived groups would replace the previous generation’s fading gangs and criminal entrepreneurs (Lombardo 2013). Nonetheless, the attempts of new groups to fully take over the old rackets and obtain the same degree of influence as their predecessors were not always successful.

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<sup>82</sup> Though there have been many gangs in Chicago since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this number is not one that was ever counted by Thrasher or anyone else; in fact, it was part of a betting pool to be included in the title (Curry 2015). Nonetheless, there were undoubtedly several dozens of such organizations.

### The Political Functions of Early Gangs in Chicago

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gangs were a function of Chicago's machine politics. Early examples include the Irish Gangs which, beyond engaging in street scraps, played a role in ensuring that their political candidates – in this case of the Democratic Party – were elected in exchange for social mobility in the form of jobs as city employees, including being police or firemen (Abu-Lughod 2007, Hagedorn 2006). At the same period, similar, politically charged white gangs – organized as athletic and social clubs – representing other groups of national origin formed (Thrasher 1927 [1963]). While there was little tension between the white gangs, they exacted violence against the recently growing African American communities in the 1919 race riots (Hagedorn 2006). White violence directed towards African Americans would occur periodically over the next fifty years and would encourage collective action in the African American community that would lead to the development of protection rackets, in the form of gangs, to protect against and respond to the abuse (Alonso 2004).

The rise of the Italians and the African Americans in the illicit marketplace, replacing the Irish and Jewish gangsters who had faded from a life of crime into societal respectability (Thrasher 1927 [1963], Lombardo 2013), was a development that was buoyed by politics. Both groups supported the Republican machine and *vice versa*, which helped to facilitate the illicit enterprises that each group wanted to undertake (Abu-Lughod 2007, Lombardo 2013, Haller 1970). The Italians, led by Capone's syndicate, specialized in bootlegging during Prohibition (1920 – 1933). The African Americans ran "the Policy," the numbers racket (Asbury 2003). The Italians, intent on maximizing their profits in the lucrative illicit liquor market, struck a deal with the African Americans in which the Italians promised not to interfere with the Policy. In the predominately African American communities of Chicago, sophisticated illicit enterprises existed beyond the Policy, with vice rackets becoming commonplace (Lombardo 2013).

As the African American population in the city grew, the roles of white gangs returned to one of intimidation and violence. In the 1940s and 50s, white gangs engaged in white supremacist terrorism to prevent African Americans from leaving the Black Belt (Seligman 2005). The effective containment of African Americans to the Black Belt during these decades led to the rise of African American gangs that developed within the context of their segregated existence. Unable to properly contest white gangs outside the Black Belt, these African American gangs emulated the behaviours

that Thrasher described in white gangs some 35 years before, namely fighting among each other for prime territory (Hagedorn 2006).

However, the established African American illicit entrepreneurs did not give these youth gangs access to the upper echelons of crime opportunity, such as the vice rackets and especially the Policy, in the black community (Hagedorn 2006). Without a deep organizational structure, the African American criminal entrepreneurs, collectively, were eventually overpowered by the Outfit. Eventually, the Outfit reneged on Capone's promise to leave the Policy alone. In an effort to consolidate their control over the illicit enterprises of Chicago, the Outfit took over the Policy circa 1950 (Lombardo 2013, Moore and Williams 2011). Unsurprisingly, given the racial politics of the era, the Italians enjoyed a competitive advantage compared to the African Americans in terms of political connections, which was the deciding factor that allowed the Italians to move on the Policy without interference from the existing political order (Lombardo 2013).

### **A New Generation of Gangs**

Realising that they had been out-manoeuvred politically, African American gangs began to develop a different tack in the late 1950s and 1960s by cultivating a political presence. It was an era that saw the "explosion" of African American gangs, with gang membership tallying "more than 50,000" (Hagedorn 2006, 202). Notable and influential African American gangs and gang leaders which came to prominence in this era included Jeff Fort's Blackstone Rangers, which later became the Black P. Stone Nation; David Barksdale's Devil Disciples, which later became the Black Disciples; Jerome "Shorty" Freeman's Black King Cobras; Larry Hoover's Supreme Gangsters; and Bobby Gore's Conservative Vice Lords (Dawley 1992, Moore and Williams 2011, Blakemore and Blakemore 1998, Safer and Cowl 1999, Hagedorn 2006, Jacobs 1977, Abadinsky 2010, DeVito 2005). The period also saw the development of some of the most significant Latino gangs still in existence, such as the Latin Kings, Two-Six (also known as the 2-6ers), and the Satan Disciples (Rey 2002, Blakemore and Blakemore 1998, Hagedorn 2015). Initially, many of these organizations – particularly the African American ones – emulated the model followed by the successful white gangs of old: enter politics and engage in crime.

At first, some of these groups were successful in gaining political clout. The African American gangs adopted some elements of the Black Power movement and sought to carve out a political space for their constituents that had previously been

denied to them (Moore and Williams 2011). In some cases, gang leadership met with civil rights leaders; the Vice Lords and the Stones met with Martin Luther King, Jr. Moreover, the Vice Lords and the Stones were able to secure federal financing for political action committees and other social organizations (Knox 2008, Pasternak 1995, Moore and Williams 2011).

One man I interviewed, Tyrell, who, as a little boy, had become a Gangster Disciple in the early 1990s, reflected on what gangs were like prior to his involvement: “Gangs weren’t, you know, initially formed to terrorize the neighbourhoods. Like the BGDN [referring to the original Black Gangster Disciple Nation], gangs were formed to preserve the neighbourhood and all those that lived in it. What society calls ‘gangs’ weren’t really gangs when they first started in the ‘60s, under David Barksdale and Shorty Freeman. They weren’t gangs per se, you know, how the media portrays gangs to be. They weren’t that. They were preservers of the neighbourhood. They used to have clothing drives and soup kitchens and book drives for the kids. But that started dying out, especially with the inception of [crack] cocaine.”

But it wasn’t just media portrayals that the African American gangs had to contend with; the African American gangs were met with fierce doubt by politicians and police who cast them, unlike the white gangs of the early twentieth century, as purely criminal entrepreneurs (Hubbard, Wyman, and Domma 2011), thus stripping any legitimate political agency away from these organizations – at least in terms of the public narrative<sup>83</sup> – and labelling them as purely criminal entities. That label was an easy sell as leaders and members of these groups were arrested and convicted for crimes, such as drug dealing, murder, and terrorism<sup>84</sup> (Pollack 1995). Plus, violence in Chicago escalated in no small part thanks to the city-wide expansion of these emerging gang coalitions that formed in 1978, which led to more opportunities for conflict (Hagedorn

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<sup>83</sup> There are reports that gangs still influence elections in Chicago (Bernstein and Isackson 2011). While I doubt the influence is as significant as it was during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Haller 1970), there is, undoubtedly, a lot of corruption in the city and the state. Since 2005, several notable politicians have been incarcerated, including former aldermen, Arenda Troutman, William Beavers, and Isaac "Ike" Sims Carothers; former U.S. representative Jesse Jackson, Jr; and former governors Rod Blagojevich and George Ryan, most of whom were convicted on fraud, bribery, or corruption charges.

<sup>84</sup> Jeff Fort’s El Rukns attempted to acquire weapons from Libya and attack government buildings in Chicago (Possley and Jr. 1986).

2015), particularly as the lucrative product of crack cocaine hit the Chicago streets (Safer and Cowl 1999, Moore and Williams 2011, Venkatesh and Levitt 2000).

### **The Birth of Two Nations**

The increased violence on the Chicago streets led to a rapidly increasing number of African American and Latino men going to prison in the 1960s and 70s (and beyond) (Hagedorn 2006). Criminologist James B. Jacobs, who wrote about Stateville Prison, Illinois' maximum security prison located in Crest Hill, Illinois, just north of the city of Joliet, described an evolution of prisoner order that echoed what John Irwin described in California. In an era of increasing minority prisoners, the prisoners organized to contest the dominant, white status quo, creating a system of prison organizations that split mostly along racial lines in order to provide protection for one another (Jacobs 1979, 1977, Irwin 1980). At the time – the late 1960s and early 1970s – most Latinos joined the Latin Kings organization; African Americans joined one of the three significant gangs: the Black P. Stone Nation, the Devil's Disciples, or the Conservative Vice Lords; and white people, except for those connected to the Italian Outfit, were left to fend for themselves (Jacobs 1977, 1979).

Illinois differed somewhat from the California prison order, where inmate organizations were founded and developed membership from within the prison walls. From early on, the Chicago gangs within prison firmly had their roots in the streets; leaders from the outside remained leaders on the inside. As such, these leaders were still preoccupied with outside activity and enjoyed outside support, something which had been historically in-existent prior to the 1970s (Jacobs 1977). While Jacobs' study ends in 1975, this last observation of the Chicago gangs' interest in the illicit affairs of the streets foreshadowed what was to come three years later as the Illinois prison order departed from the historical social order maintained in the California and Texas prisons.

In 1978, Illinois prisons saw the formation of two "nations" – consortia – of gangs, known as the People and the Folks. The former developed from an alliance between the Vice Lords, and the latter developed from the efforts of Larry Hoover in Stateville to unite several gangs under one umbrella for protection (Hagedorn 2015, Moore and Williams 2011). These nations were, and still are, unique in the gang landscape of the U.S. in that they are not racially exclusive. In fact, Larry Hoover, in founding the Folks at Stateville Prison, included several of the major leaders of the Hispanic gangs in his initial efforts to found the Folk Nation (Hagedorn 2015).

Historically, African American, Hispanic, and white gangs are part (or have been part) of both coalitions within the prison and, at least in name, the street (Hubbard, Wyman, and Domma 2011). These consortia sought to unite gangs with like philosophical and entrepreneurial outlooks (Moore and Williams 2011). To that end, each consortium served an “enterprise syndicate” that sought to centralize illicit enterprise by minimizing competition among each other and maximizing protection, particularly in prison, thus maximizing the potential benefits of collective action (Hagedorn 2015, Block 1980).

### **Gangs in Business**

Though Larry Hoover was sentenced to 150 to 200 years for ordering the murder of William “Pookie” Young in 1973 (Tyson 1996), his ascent to leadership of the Gangster Disciples occurred while incarcerated, after the 1974 death of David Barksdale (Safer and Crowl 1999). Functionally illiterate upon his entry into the penal system, Hoover gained his GED and began to read profusely. Hoover was especially taken with *Boss*, Mike Royko’s 1971 biography of Richard J. Daley, the mayor of Chicago during Hoover’s youth. “‘It was very motivating, because it showed you can make a transition from a street gang to a socially acceptable gang,’ [Hoover said], referring to the Irish and other white immigrant gangs in Chicago in the early 1900s” (Tyson 1996). It was a history that inspired Hoover to develop his “New Concept” in which he renamed the Gangster Disciples to “Growth and Development,” reorganizing the gang into “a corporate-style business and social organization” (Hagedorn 2006, 204).

Despite the reorganization of the outward mission and renaming of the Gangster Disciples, the gang was one of the most prolific drug distributors in the city. A similar trajectory was undertaken by the People Nation, that had an outward presence as a community organization, inspired, in part, by the teachings of the Nation of Islam, but that also sold drugs (although it initially resisted selling crack) (Moore and Williams 2011). The two nations competed against each other for a share of the market. A high rate of violence accompanied the resulting “crack wars” that occurred in Chicago – as was the case in other major U.S. cities – during the 1980s and 90s (Tyson 1996, Hagedorn 2006). However, the African American gangs never matured in the way that Larry Hoover had envisioned. They did not transition into legitimate businesses as the white immigrant gangs before them, nor did they ever compete with the Italian Outfit, who still maintained their dominion of the majority of criminal rackets in the city – with the notable exception of the wholesale drug trade, nor were they independent

operators of the drug trade; they required someone – usually a Hispanic gang member – to connect them to a wholesale supplier (Hagedorn 2015).

Moreover, the post-racial world attempted by the People and Folks Nations was one that functioned due to the need for protection rather than the actual absence of racism. In fact, as criminologist John Hagedorn chronicles in his 2015 book, *The In\$ane Chicago Way: The Daring Plan by Chicago Gangs to Create a Spanish Mafia*, in the 1990s, the Latin Folks attempted (though ultimately failed) to develop their own independent consortium of gangs, in part with the blessing of the fading Outfit, with the goal to emulate the success the Italians had enjoyed for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the advantages the Latino gangs had compared to the African Americans was that they had closer access to the wholesalers. This isn't to say that each gang had a direct connection; rather, given the race politics between gangs, where Latino gangs prioritized each other, most Latino gangs were able to obtain heroin and cocaine with relative ease compared to non-Latino gangs that did have direct access to the wholesalers (Hagedorn 2015). In the 1990s, the gang that supplied the rest of the Folks Nation was the Maniac Latin Disciples, whose membership overlapped with the Herrera Family of Little Village (Hagedorn 2015).

### **Wholesale Drug Trafficking in Chicago from the 1970s**

For a time, the Herrera Family DTO – an organization that was united chiefly by the kinship ties of the six families that were involved – was perhaps the biggest and most resilient player in the wholesale drug market in Chicago (Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2009). The earliest members of the family emigrated from Durango, Mexico, to Chicago in the 1950s (Lupsha and Schlegel 1980). They moved mostly heroin, given that they had control over an entire supply chain. They farmed opium poppies in Durango, processed it into heroin, transported it to the market place, and supplied it to distributors, making it (almost) a “farm-to-arm” provider (DeVito 2005, Grayson 2010), which is unusual in the wholesale drug trade. Later, when the Colombian traffickers were shut down over the Caribbean routes, they started moving cocaine and established a small stake in marijuana and methamphetamines (Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2009). By the late 1970s, some estimates placed the Herreras' collective earnings at \$60 million as their distribution network expanded past Chicago, their principal distribution hub, to several major U.S. cities, including Denver, Los Angeles, Miami, and Pittsburgh (Abadinsky 2010, Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2009, DeVito 2005).



The Herreras' success in introducing their brown heroin to the Chicago market made their organization a target for law enforcement (Lupsha and Schlegel 1980). By the mid-1980s, the Herreras were suffering significant losses at the hands of the justice system which had managed to identify, arrest, and convict dozens of their operatives (DeVito 2005). While the Herrera Family's distribution was initially left reeling from these arrests, by 1988 they had replaced their key operatives, allowing them to return to wholesaling (Abadinsky 2010). In the early 1990s, the Herrera Family distributed their product to the streets to the Folk Nation via the Maniac Latin Disciples and Hugo "Juice" Herrera, a member of both the Family and the Maniac Latin Disciples (Hagedorn 2015). However, the Herreras – like the drug trafficking organizations that have followed them – did not exclusively operate with Latinos, or the Folks Nation for that matter. Instead, they sought profitable ventures wherever they might be.

Biggs, a general for the Black P. Stone Nation in a Chicago suburb, described his plug back when he used to move significant amounts of cocaine – a handful of kilos at a time – some twenty years ago, as being a "cartel from Durango" – likely the Herreras or one of their subordinates – that used to stamp their product with a scorpion. Biggs said he "inherited" his connection from an older man who was interested in slowing down his own illegal activities. Mutual friends had introduced the two: "When I got out here, I was running [cocaine], but just small shit, like an ounce or two a day, then I found out dude<sup>85</sup> was plugged with the weight<sup>86</sup>."

Biggs went on to explain that his connection was not affiliated with any particular street gang. This lack of affiliation allowed Biggs to be recruited into the fold of the suburban cocaine crew: "[The people in the crew] were getting robbed by gangs out here, you know. Latin Kings – that stuff come up a few times – [the Kings] stuck them over [robbed them] a few times. And Gangster Disciples didn't stick them up, but they wouldn't pay them back. [The crew would] front [the Gangster Disciples] work [drugs], they wouldn't pay it [back], so [the crew] came to me because they knew I was already plugged in the streets and [another gang wouldn't] fuck with me, [so the crew] wouldn't have no problems like that [anymore]. So, that's what it ended up being. And

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<sup>85</sup> The man Biggs was buying his supply from.

<sup>86</sup> A regular, large amount.

[my connect] inherited the plug from his uncle, so he passed it down to us. When he stopped, we took over with the cartel [and started distributing for them].”

In short, although the actors have changed from time to time, the Herrera’s relationship with the gangs reflects the relationship between drug trafficking organizations and gangs that Chicago has known since then. Today, the foremost law enforcement view vis-à-vis the wholesale drug market in the city, as told to me by the agents working at the Chicago HIDTA, is that “Sinaloa is dominant and established in Chicago. They have relationships with gangs and distributors.” Moreover, they supply whoever has money in the city; they don’t have any particular allegiance to one gang or another. Business is booming; there is a high heroin user base in the city and the greater metropolitan area (Dumke 2013), which despite the uptick in media coverage is something which isn’t new (Szalavitz 2016).

The retail drug business in Chicago is still, by and large, a “street-corner conspiracy,” and controlling that corner means controlling its profits. Accordingly, the competition between gangs over the local market results in the violence which has been an ongoing problem in the city that dates back to the 1970s (Dumke 2013, Hagedorn 2015). Questions, however, remain. In a city as big as Chicago, is one to believe that only one wholesale organization monopolises its illicit drug market? And why does violence continue to flourish in Chicago, when, in the southwest, visible street-level violence has been decreasing due to business interests and/or control of the street by prison gangs?

## NINE: THE STRUGGLE TO MAKE IT

*THE ANATOMY OF CHICAGO'S BIGGEST EVER DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATION*

In January 2015, Pedro and Margarito Flores, of the Little Village neighbourhood, were sentenced to a mere 14 years for being the most prolific drug suppliers Chicago had ever known (WGN - Chicago 2015, Sweeney and Meisner 2015). Pedro testified that he and his twin brother were associated with the Sinaloa Cartel, then headed by Joaquín Guzmán. Through that connection, the Flores twins became the premier suppliers of cocaine and heroin in Chicago, coordinating the delivery of over two billion dollars' street worth – at least 71 tons – to the Windy City from 1998 to 2008 (Flores 2009, Meisner 2015, 2014). As a result of the Flores's link to the Sinaloa Cartel, the Chicago Crime Commission declared Guzmán, a man who has never set foot in Chicago, to be “Public Enemy No. 1,” the first since Al Capone<sup>87</sup> (Elgas 2015).

The twins did well for themselves for several years, by avoiding direct involvement with any of the gang politics of the city (McGahan 2013, Sweeney and Meisner 2015), a strategy designed to keep them out of the path of violence and arrest. But, despite their best laid plans, at the height of their wholesaling careers in 2008, their operations were compromised by law enforcement. The Flores twins chose to cooperate with the DEA; they helped gather evidence and build cases against members of Guzmán's organization in exchange for the possibility of leniency in their sentences. That cooperation, in turn, led to their relatively light sentences, considering the magnitude of the drugs they smuggled into Chicago. Upon their sentencing, U.S. District Chief Judge Ruben Castillo told the men: “You and your family will always have to look over your shoulder. Any time you start your car, you're going to be wondering, ‘Is that car going to start or is it going to explode?’” (Meisner 2015). Such statements reflect the violent reputation the Sinaloa Federation has not only in México but also in the American public consciousness.

In 2009, Pedro Flores, who claimed ultimate responsibility over the twins' illicit enterprise, entered a statement in court which described in broad terms the

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<sup>87</sup> Though the FBI has named various outlaws as “Public Enemy Number 1,” throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Chicago Crime Commission had not named anyone as such since Al Capone, the first person they labeled.

component elements of the organization. That statement was heavily redacted when released to the public; however, from it, we can surmise that the role of the Flores DTO as described by Pedro Flores was that of a transnational transportation and wholesale distribution coordinator of primarily heroin and cocaine (Flores 2009). Pedro described the relationship that he and his brother had with the Sinaloa Federation. Apparently, the men knew the bosses personally; however, the connection had taken time to achieve. At first, they were introduced to connections in the drug trade by their father who allegedly moved drugs for the Herrera Family back in the early 1980s (Sweeney and Meisner 2015). The twins developed comparatively sophisticated and efficient methods of transporting drugs, which in turn gained them the attention and confidence of the higher-ups (McGahan 2013).

While the twins may have developed the strategies they used to smuggle their illicit wares across the border, Pedro Flores (2009) indicated that the twins ultimately worked as liaisons, coordinating the different elements of their transportation and distribution network to ensure that both product and payment were delivered with minimal loss (See Figure 4 for a visual representation). The twins' jobs were differentiated and compartmentalized: Margarito connected smugglers and/or transporters to the product in Mexico, while Pedro coordinated the distribution to local wholesalers, first in Chicago, and later in other cities in the U.S. and Canada. The transnational and intrastate carriage of the drugs occurred via a variety of transportation methods, including freight containers that move by land and sea, semi-trucks that haul trailers cross country, and even air freight shipments.

The agents at the Chicago HIDTA indicated that the traffickers did not always accompany the product. Sometimes, the trafficker would hide the drugs in a licit load of goods, making legitimate drivers, without their knowledge and consent, part of the transportation network. Once the product reached Chicago, it was transported to local stash houses, repackaged, and moved to one of the approximately 30 large, local wholesale distributors that Pedro Flores had recruited, or it went onward to wholesalers in other cities. The wholesalers moved the product onward, independently of the Flores twins' oversight, to smaller-scale wholesale customers who would likely sell to those individuals who were involved in breaking the product down for retail sale.

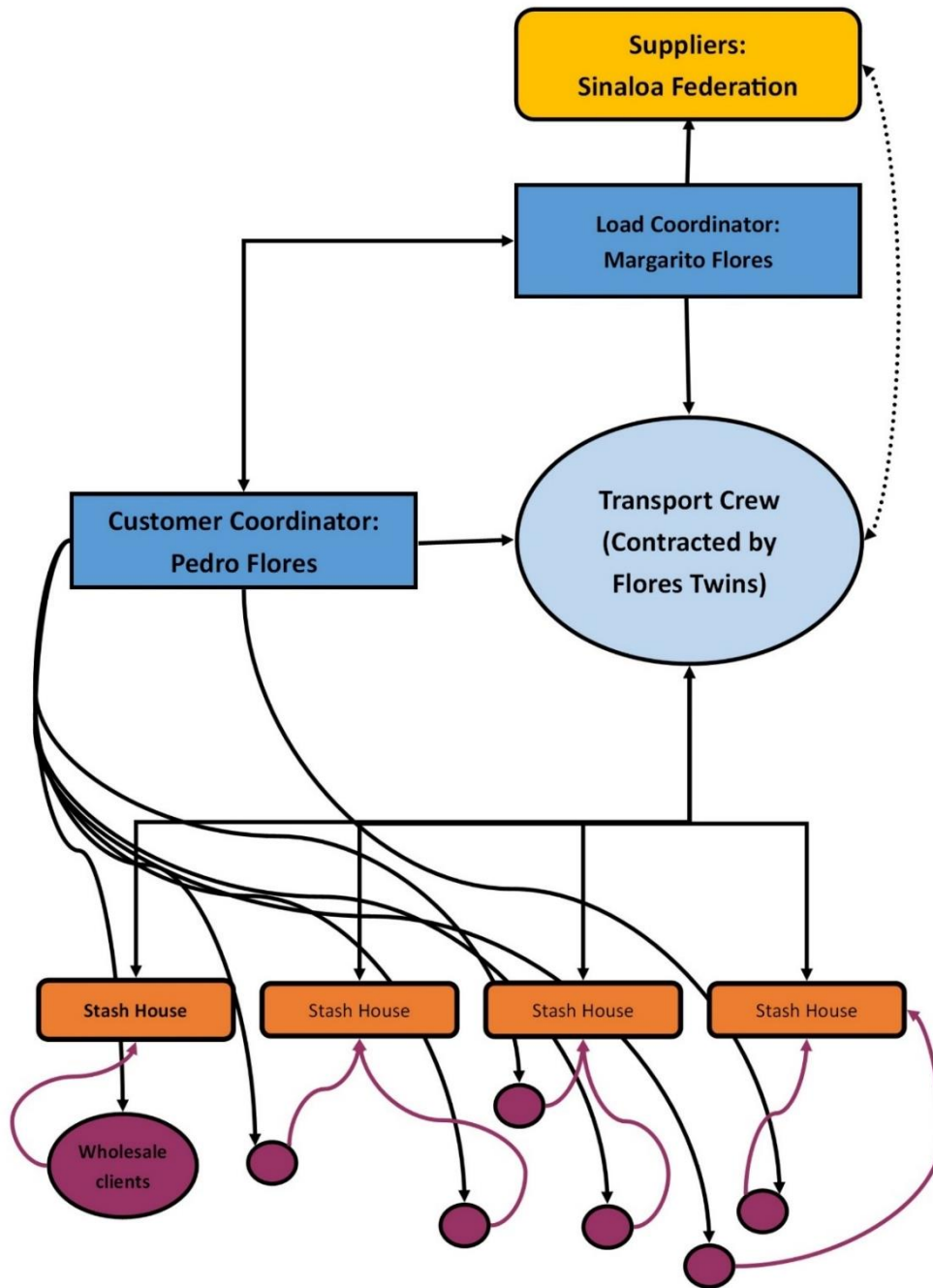


Figure 4: Pedro Flores' description of the structure of the Flores DTO

#### LESSONS FROM THE FLORES' ARREST ABOUT CHICAGO'S WHOLESALE DRUG TRADE

The arrest of the Flores twins is important for four reasons. First, Pedro Flores' account indicates that the Flores DTO served as a contractor for the Sinaloa Federation, rather than being a part of the organization, much in the same way law enforcement and gang members in Arizona described. Second, the Flores arrest did not significantly curb the drug trade in Chicago, illustrating the market's resilience. Third, there is little evidence that a significant proportion of the violence in Chicago is underwritten by Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Finally, despite the arrest of the heads of a

reportedly billion-dollar operation, there is little public discussion of how the proceeds from the enterprise were disposed, either via criminal reinvestment, remittance, or other money laundering strategies.

**Lesson 1: The Flores DTO operated as a contractor.**

The process of drug procurement, transportation, and distribution described by Pedro Flores indicates that the Flores' organization operated with its own risks in the U.S. that were not mitigated in any way by the actions or guarantees of their suppliers (Flores 2009). Simply put, once the Flores' organization took the product from their suppliers at the Sinaloa Federation, the Flores DTO assumed the risks associated with the product. The transaction of drugs for money also transferred the associated risk of handling the product with it. Accordingly, the Flores DTO was responsible for paying for the load in its entirety, regardless of what ultimately happened to it.

Therefore, the Flores DTO's ability to generate income was dependent on its ability to ensure the products' safe transportation, delivery, and sale to wholesale customers. The mechanics of this process were the sole responsibility of the Flores organization and did not include involvement of the Sinaloa Federation in stateside operations, meaning that no Sinaloa protection for the product was offered after it was transferred to the Flores organization. To that end, Pedro Flores' statement debunks the notion that the wholesale drug trade in Chicago is an enterprise that is directly controlled and managed by the bosses in Mexico and forces us to reconsider the domestic characterization of the drug trade, how it ought to be policed, and its effects on society since the spectre of the Sinaloan bogeyman is more lore than reality.

To that end, although the Flores twins were born and bred in Chicago, albeit to Mexican parents and, specifically, to a father who was involved in the wholesale drug trade (Sweeney and Meisner 2015), there is little indication that significant operations of the Sinaloa Federation, either in terms of overseeing the Flores DTO or replacing its operational capability once it was dismantled, existed in Chicago. The Sinaloa Federation has not migrated or expanded organizationally to Chicago, although it has likely been the primary, though not sole, source of cocaine and heroin supplied to the city's streets. Instead, the Sinaloa Cartel maintains its Mexican base and relies on an array of subcontractors (Dumke 2013), for there is always a replacement for the fallen, to operate the stateside command-and-control structure that transports and distributes their illicit wares to domestic markets. This arrangement maximizes income and minimizes operational risk over time vis-à-vis the U.S. market.

**Lesson 2: Typical wholesaling arrangements are in flux and numerous.**

Despite the arrests of high-ranking members in Mexico associated with the Sinaloa Federation, such as Jesús Vicente Zambada Niebla (b. 1975), and the fall of the Flores twins, the retail illicit drug market has proven to be resilient (McGahan 2013). The Flores DTO was a significant cog, although not an irreplaceable one, in the machinery of the Chicago wholesale drug trade which included several wholesalers, some of whom contracted with the Sinaloa Federation seemingly independently from one another (Dumke 2013). While some dealers reported a drop in the quality of product available and an increase in price upon the Flores's arrest, there is still significant availability – dependent on one's connections – of cocaine and heroin in the greater Chicago area. So, while the Flores DTO may have been an organizational anomaly that was not replaced perfectly in kind upon its demise, there continues to be a largescale supply of illicit drugs available, indicating that those who supplied the Flores DTO did not supply it exclusively.

That drugs continue to flow into Chicago comes at little surprise; demand has been high for over four decades. Previously, the market remained resilient and well stocked despite the decline of the Herrera family, which ultimately yielded to other market players who managed to meet demand relatively well when the Herrera's could no longer do so. Like resilient licit markets, the ability for the illicit drug market to continue indicates that the connections between the component parts of the network, its nodes, are not easily severed even by severe disruption (Peron, da Fontoura Costa, and Rodrigues 2012), as was the case in the Flores's arrest.

How (a)typical the Flores DTO is in terms of being a logistics and transportation outfit is uncertain. However, given the tendencies of DTOs to structure risk within their supply chains so that if one component fails, the whole chain does not entirely collapse, it is more probable that an array of transportation networks exists which allows the Mexican DTOs to continue servicing Chicago in the event that one transportation network, even a key one, is interrupted or taken out of business for whatever reason. There is little information as to who the current key large-scale wholesalers are, with current groups engaging in smokescreening to keep their identities and origins under wraps. While the agents at the HIDTA told me that the wholesale supply was the responsibility of Mexican DTOs, and primarily groups that were part of the Sinaloa Federation, they noted that, unlike other cities where Hispanic gangs monopolize the retail sale, both African American and Hispanic gangs engage in widespread retail sale in Chicago.

### *Getting Connected*

Getting connected is not always a straightforward process. It takes luck, persistence, established connections, and sometimes a combination of these factors. Despite the claims of the HIDTA agents, the street didn't indicate one monopolizing supplier. One Chicago police officer, Liam Banner (not his real name), who worked plain clothes and dealt with drugs and gangs issues, described the smokescreening process he observed on the beat: "We know [the cartels] provide the drugs to the gangs. But at the street level, most of their influence is evaporated. They are increasingly using runners and 'cutouts' to move their products."

"What is a 'cutout'?" I asked.

"Cutouts are people who are not in direct contact with the drug cartels," Officer Banner explained. "They receive orders and payments via third party facilitators. This allows the cartels to stand back [and minimize their risk. Through this system,] the cartels have no problems supplying rival gangs. At the street level, it's all about business. It doesn't matter who is paying for the drugs to get here."

Officer Banner explained that there is an "even mix" of cartels delivering the products to gang members and gang members going out to pick up their supply. He said that often the gang members will venture into the south suburbs where there are stash houses to pick up drugs. That is not to say there aren't stash houses in Chicago because Banner has seen them personally. It's somewhat a crapshoot where the stash houses are located, though by his estimation, they could be more common in working class Hispanic neighbourhoods not known for any sort of gang presence.

Broadly speaking, when I asked about the origin of their product, most who had dealt drugs could only provide vague answers, though the ethnic origins reported varied past the stereotypical "Mexican" plug, indicating the possibility that DTOs originating from other countries had at least a partial market share. However, a few respondents had direct experience with wholesalers.

June, a woman who now worked as a secretary but had been convicted of selling drugs in the 1980s, described the wholesale market of the 1980s as one that included the Colombians, a plausible claim given that the 1980s was their heyday in supplying cocaine to the U.S. She had, in fact, stumbled into trafficking when a high school friend, Lisa, invited her to participate in an interstate drive from Miami to Chicago. Lisa was a first-generation Colombian girl, whose family was involved in drug trafficking. One day, when they were 19, Lisa asked June if she wanted to go on a trip to Miami.



“We were sitting around, talking. We were young and didn’t really think about going to college or anything like that. We were always hustling – you know doing jobs – TJ Maxx, Marshall’s, whatever – nothing illegal, trying to figure out how to make money. Lisa then asked me if I wanted to go on this trip to Miami. She was up front about it. We were going there to pick up some drugs and drive them back. They would be hidden in compartments that she would know how to access. We would each get seven thousand dollars. I said yes.” June didn’t really think much about it. For her, though she didn’t use, drugs were a normal part of life in the community where she grew up. Plus, there was nothing scary about the job. It didn’t feel like a risk. June trusted Lisa and wasn’t scared at the prospect of going to Miami.

The car was unremarkable except for the mechanism hidden in the cigarette lighter which released hidden panels behind which the cocaine was to be hidden. June guessed it was one of the modifications that were made at the auto body shop run by Lisa’s relatives. The drive took two days. June described it as if it were a road trip undertaken by two friends. “We would stop along the way to eat, switch drivers. It wasn’t anything special.”

The young women spent two days in a suburb of Miami, visiting with Lisa’s family and having a good time. At some point, the car was taken and loaded. “I wasn’t there when it happened,” June said. “One of Lisa’s family members loaded it up for us, and eventually it was just time to go back to Chicago. I don’t even know how much we brought back with us. It was the first trip for both of us, and it could have been as little as the two keys I saw afterwards.”

As June tried to offload the product, she was eventually caught. The arrest stigmatized her within the trafficking network, so she was not invited to participate in the trafficking activities any further. Eventually, she faded away from that circle of people and knew nothing more about them.

Biggs, a general for the Black P. Stone Nation whom I interviewed in a public library in the Chicago suburb he was responsible for, described his relationship with the wholesalers as one that allowed him access to a product that had already been smuggled to the Chicagoland area. Like June, he merely picked up a pre-loaded car and took it to its final destination. Over the years, he was given more and more quantity to move, though the total amount never exceeded 15 kilos a week, an amount that occurred only once. Eventually, in the early 1990s, Biggs was arrested for possession with the intent to distribute and decided to stop taking the risk of moving large

quantities which could put him behind bars for a decade or more. He described how connections are passed on between wholesalers and gang members:

“[W]hen I quit – when I semi-retired – I plugged [the cartel] with one of my other guys that was working through this time because – I don’t know if you know – but cartel don’t want to see that money stop. I made a lot of money for them. And ‘it just stopped’ is unheard of. You don’t just quit without going to the joint or dying. [...]they’ll understand and respect the fact that you ain’t doing it no more because you went to the penitentiary, or you’ve been killed behind it. So for me to just up and quit, I had to basically show them I’d have somebody else that’s going to get the slot. [I had to ensure the cartel guys that] ‘you ain’t going to lose money, these are guys you can trust, he’s been working with me already in the past couple of years,’ which he was. So he basically took over. Took over the business for me so there was no stopping their money. You know, my guy works good, they like him and they’ve been going ever since.”

Ignacio, a mid-level drug dealer who supplied wholesale quantities of drugs to street dealers in his own clique and dealt from his house, indicated that while introductions were still a critical part of getting a wholesaler, there was also a series of norms which had to be adhered to, which meant that a lower ranking gang member could not circumvent a higher ranking one to get that introduction. This practice ensured that lower ranking dealers did not know who, in fact, their ultimate suppliers were.

“Do you think the people who are buying wholesale from the gang [...] know which cartel they’re [doing business] with?” I asked Ignacio.

“No, they don’t know nothing. They don’t. You’re not supposed to tell them. That’s what our code of silence means. We’re not going to give up our connect to somebody. You know?”

“So you [as a customer from the gang’s main supplier] don’t even care who the connect is? Like you don’t care whether he’s from *Gulfo*, whether he’s from Sinaloa, or whatever.”

“Yeah, we don’t care. We don’t care obviously. We don’t ‘set clique<sup>88</sup>’ with [the wholesalers] like that.”

### *The Clique as an Enterprise*

The clique functions as an enterprise that runs independently of the wholesaler. Ted, a gang member whose responsibility was to show the new recruits the ropes, outlined some of the principal roles undertaken by members of his gang. There is the main boss for the neighbourhood, who deals with connecting the gang to its wholesale source, and a few other higher ups who provide guidance. “They’re the business type. They’re kind of like Al Capone and focus on the money. They never tell anybody who doesn’t need to know what they’re doing. They won’t even tell their girlfriends. Their job is mostly to buy and sell the drugs at a wholesale level. They don’t really gangbang anymore unless they get drunk and get wild after a night out or something.

“[...When violence is to happen, t]he big homies encourage us [the younger guys] to make a blueprint before doing a drive-by. We need to know what clothes we’re going to change into, the route we’re going to take, the location we’re going to hit, and the possible cuts. You need to have a reason and ask permission before you shoot. Then, if it’s good, you’ll get a gun and go handle your business. So now some of the younger guys will be asking me for that permission.”

A tier below are the enforcers: “We’re all about territory and you need guys who can handle that.” Then there are “senders. We have guys who we send to move a bag. Sometimes they are moving weight, they don’t always know. We know the cops are watching him, so we let him get half way to where he needs to go and then send him back. We create decoys, so it’s hard for the cops to know what we are doing. Some guys don’t gangbang on the street, but they’re still part of the gang. Take my cousin. He drives a truck for the city. It’s perfect cover for him to make deliveries.”

Finally, at the bottom of the totem pole are the *shorties* – pre-teen and young teenagers – who only gangbang. Their job is to post up on the street corner, intimidate, and sell dope. They also serve as the first line of defence in the neighbourhood, as they are supposed to yell out when a stranger enters the area.

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<sup>88</sup> Here Ignacio is describing the process of becoming a group which is affiliated with another as if to be a subsidiary. His clique was one of many in the area that pertained to a larger gang that had sets and cliques throughout the city’s south side.

What is clear, however, is that once an individual becomes a member of a clique, he remains a member forever. There is no progressing to a larger gang; doing so is seen as an act of treachery. The fundamental unit of trust is the clique to which a gang member belongs. That relationship dynamic appears to be the fundamental reason why violence has been a constant factor in street-level gang interactions. It also means that the gang does not care who its source of drugs is, so long as the quality is good enough; accordingly, gangs pursue the wholesalers who give them the best deal.

Returning to the street view, the threat of violence means that navigating the underworld to get connected is risky, though not impossible. Wilfred, who had attended a large public university downstate, and travelled to Chicago to buy the drugs he dealt to the college students there, noted that although he sometimes had dealings with Mexican wholesalers, he found that his Jamaican suppliers had better, albeit inconsistent, product.

“The crazy thing is Jamaicans had a better quality [of product],” Wilfred explained, “because [...] every time those Latinos passed it off, man, it got stepped on<sup>89</sup> again, or got shorter [meaning that] it didn’t weigh [what it was supposed to]. [...But, with the] Jamaicans, they never had the same kind [of heroin] all the time, either. They had some China White, some Mexican Brown, some Beige, or some Concrete.”

In sum, June, Biggs, Ignacio, and Wilfred’s accounts show that maintaining connection may be dependent on family or legacy ties. By relying on a vouching system and by threatening violence should that system be violated, gangs, rather than the wholesalers, impose the layers of separation that ultimately protect the wholesalers. The result is that wholesalers, like the Flores twins, prefer to work with known distributors, who will endeavour to protect their source, because such parties will make for less risky transactions (at least in theory) and will limit unwanted advances from unknown, inexperienced, or untrusted parties.

To that end, generally, the people I met who were active in the lower-levels of the drug trade reported that the people who are the most reliably connected are almost always Hispanic. Nevertheless, not all Hispanic gangs have good access and may rely, just as their white and African American counterparts do, on developing a connection in order to have a good, quality supply to sell. Though availability of product

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<sup>89</sup> adulterated

was undoubtedly high, many respondents reported difficulties in getting good, consistent suppliers who could give them high-quality goods. Danny, a member of one of the 2-6 cliques, who currently sold drugs, described the intense competition between street dealers and the difficulty in finding a good plug:

“Everybody wants to be some type of boss. Everyone wants their own connection. So right now shit’s fucked up. There ain’t one nigga with a big plug. There’s lots of plugs. You can’t trust people; not even your own. Sometimes niggas in the mob<sup>90</sup> don’t have the right connects, so sometimes you have to leave the neighbourhood to get the good shit. I used to have to go to Harlem<sup>91</sup> to get hooked up. There’s too much competition to be dealing garbage.”

It was that very competition, namely over the open-air markets afforded by any given street corner, that was a significant driver of the drug-related violence in Chicago.

### **Lesson 3: Protection and violence in Chicago is (mostly) a function of gangs, not the cartel contractors.**

#### *Little Direct Cartel Violence*

Given that most of the wholesaling arrangements in Chicago are undertaken by subcontractors, there are relatively few professionally executed hits in Chicago. Wholesalers subcontracting work from the Mexican DTOs, like the Flores twins, do not put themselves in positions where violence is necessary. They achieve insulation by minimizing the transactions they engage in and ensuring that those with whom they do business are interested in long-term business relationships. The need for violence or the role of enforcers was notably absent from Flores’ account of his business (unless it fell within the parts of the statement which were redacted).

Moreover, like El Paso and Phoenix, where DTOs do not have a publicly visible operation, it appears that if the Mexican DTOs do operate muscle in Chicago, they are careful not to leave evidence which implicates them. To that end, Mick Dumke, a reporter who had covered drug rings in Chicago for several years, noted that while professional hits are not unheard of, they are rare and hard to follow up on. He gave me a recent example of an unsolved killing whereby the victim, a 25-year-old man named

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<sup>90</sup> *Mob* is often used synonymously with *gang* in Chicago street parlance.

<sup>91</sup> Harlem would have been an approximately 40 to 50-minute drive from where Danny normally stayed in the city.

Xavier Tripp, was shot and killed. His assailants approached him in a van, executed him, and drove off in West Garfield Park (Lansu 2014). Little information was published by the press, but Dumke told me that the victim was wearing body armour and was carrying an AK-47, which made him not just an ordinary victim in the ongoing Chicago gang violence and possibly the victim of an organized killing.

Even wholesale stash houses, which can house thousands of dollars' worth of product, are not staffed with armed guards. Officer Banner described his observations while on the job: "The cartels take a very low-key approach. These 'guards' aren't armed. It wouldn't surprise me at all that most of these guys who are in the houses are picked up and told that they will be paid to sit in a house and make sure nothing happens to it. They probably are told not to go into the garage and just sit there and watch T.V. all day. They do it because they get paid more than they could by standing outside of a hardware store looking for work every day. Probably the guy in the house has no fucking clue about what's going on, and it's someone else who comes in to handle the product. These guards are not cartel members; it's like they are contracted by the cartel to do that one job."

The presence of cartel members is muted because, unlike in Mexico and like almost anywhere else in the U.S., there is no tolerance for them to act visibly. Violence in the U.S. is undoubtedly bad for business since it attracts law enforcement. In Chicago, the power struggles between different gangs at the street level are visible, meaning that it is unlikely that wholesalers would get involved in these struggles. One gang member named Evil \$<sup>92</sup> told me: The cartels "don't have no significance here. Besides the fact of bringing [wholesale amounts] and dropping it off to wherever they got to drop it off to. The cartels – just like the Mexican Mafia, just like the Crips, Bloods, MS-13<sup>93</sup> – all them motherfuckers do not carry no weight in Chicago, period. If they were ever to come and try to flex or try to come and set up shop or anything like that, they're going to get fucking blown out of the water because [...e]very square inch of Chicago is occupied by some type of fucking gang and they take that shit serious."

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<sup>92</sup> Pronounced: "Evil Money."

<sup>93</sup> These gangs are well known in other parts of the U.S. However, as Evil \$ noted, they have a small, arguably insignificant, presence in Chicago. Though Evil \$ was not the only one to refer to the Mexican Mafia, it is unclear which branch of the gang he was referring to.

### *Gang Life and Street Violence*

Four facets of gang life were clear from the stories of those involved. First, gang life is still very much alive and well in Chicago, though its nature has evolved over the past two to three decades. Unlike the El Paso and Phoenix gangs, Chicago gangs can still sustain their numbers and engage in traditional activities, like hanging out on the street corner to sell dope or fighting with another, rival group.

Second, compared to El Paso and Phoenix, Chicago gang units tend to be smaller and more focused on the block that the clique is from rather than the gang that the clique belongs to. While the block *is* important in El Paso and Phoenix, it has become less so as time has gone on. Moreover, the little cliques are responsive to the commands and whims of the prison gangs which supersede them in ultimate authority on the street. Accordingly, on Chicago streets, disputes may emerge even between cliques that are, in theory, part of a larger gang. This intragang conflict is qualitatively different from what I observed in both El Paso and Phoenix.

Third, taking control of a block in Chicago is not an arduous process nor does it require a lot of resources: “a ‘bad neighbourhood’ is often the result of a handful of people, maybe one or two houses that are running an illicit enterprise,” explained investigative journalist Mick Dumke. “These criminal actors take advantage of [...] areas that have a culture against snitching and the residents lose confidence in a neighbourhood and the police’s ability to police it adequately.” Cheryl, a U.S. military veteran whose son became a gang member despite her best efforts to shield him from the allures of the promises made by the streets, added to Dumke’s description, characterizing the area she lived in as one that had a very mixed community where blocks that appeared to have the safety afforded to middle class America were next to blocks that were blighted by gang violence. Nonetheless, on the whole, she still considered her community as the “hood,” a place where “you don’t have an option not to know how to fight or you’ll... or you’ll be easily devoured.”

Finally, the fractionalization of the gangs on the streets of Chicago indicate that, unlike El Paso and Phoenix, there does not appear to be control exerted from prison, despite the ongoing, loose affiliations that occur within jail and prison. This lack of control means that prison gangs – unlike in the southwestern context – cannot effectively curb the ongoing violence that has come to publicly characterize Chicago over the past decades as smaller cliques fight over the open air markets which they depend upon in order to sell their product.

### *Chicago's Lockup and a Lack of Control from Prison*

Chicago's violence is often grounded in conflict among cliques seeking to control territory and to gain benefit from that control (Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga, 2013), which would allow them to sell or warehouse drugs. Over the years, the nature of the competition among cliques has changed significantly. As previously noted, historically, there has been an organizing of gangs under the People and the Folk Nations.

Individuals who had served time in county jail or state prison described a system inside that was similar to what had been described in the southwest. Several layers of control exist, from a board of directors, to securities, to gallery coordinators. However, these individuals don't appear to have the same kind of control that their counterparts in southwestern prisons enjoy, particularly when it pertains to maintaining status upon their release or requesting favours from or exerting their will on the street. CB, a Gangster Disciple who had served time in various state prisons, explained that membership to the federation is "about living, trying to live there as comfortable as possible; you got certain areas you can go in and a certain space."

Historically, those alliances also functioned in terms of mitigating acrimony on the street. However, in recent years – since 2008 and perhaps before – those alliances have broken down and the younger generation has a new outlook driven by money. The fast money culture prioritizes the ability to make a buck compared to the relative protection afforded by being part of a bigger consortium of gangs. One high-ranking corrections official, who had much experience in high-security settings in Illinois prisons, noted that the disintegration of the alliances under the Peoples and the Folks at the street level might be traced to the successful arrest and incarceration of the higher leadership of these gangs, which disrupted the hierarchy necessary to impose a vertical control structure. Some of the biggest names who aren't already dead, such as Larry Hoover, Jeff Fort, and Gino Colón, are serving life sentences. According to the corrections official and nearly all of my gang affiliated respondents, nobody has stepped up to take those leadership roles, so the organizations have fractured, particularly among African American gangs.

Miles Surfer (not his real name), a police officer whose work focused on gangs in the north-western part of the city, described the current situation as follows: "We've seen leaders in different segments [...] in more of a district-type level that may have a little bit of weight, but nothing [resembling] that [historical, overarching] leadership



role, mainly because of the big time that's been handed out to [those big time leaders]. [...]it goes hand-in-hand with what we were seeing with this kind of breakdown in this leadership, this whole hierarchy. Gang enforcement used to be real big on [...] every three to six months, going down the hierarchies [...] and it was just getting more and more difficult trying to establish who was who because everything got so small. And it became a warlord like. We got different factions that don't talk to other factions, [and] they're in the same gang. Years ago, there was always a bridge with different factions.”

Officer Banner explained a similar phenomenon in his southern beat: “Today, the Hispanic gangs are more committed to hierarchy; they are much more organized and committed to their history. The black gangs are more disorganized. With us having incarcerated so many of the older members we now see very, very young kids – I'm talking about 13, 14, or 15 years old – who create their own little gangs inside the more established gangs. Some end up growing and exerting influence. They gain status by engaging in shootings. The vast majority of drive-bys and most of the violence is carried out by young guys between 13 and 18 years old trying to make a name for themselves. With the black gangs, there is often no reason for aligning with one of the established gangs or another. Now affiliation can be based on a whim that is influenced by whatever music is popular. Say Chief Keef<sup>94</sup> is popular, then a lot of the kids want to become Black Disciples.

“A lot of what we see today is a departure from what we saw historically. There used to be something like a board of directors for the black gangs. But the black gangs are becoming increasingly flat organizations. It's a function of how small the gangs are becoming. Yes, there are historic animosities between groups such as the BDs and the GDs. But that's not how conflicts are necessarily drawn today. The paper might report that there are 30,000 GDs, and the reader presumes that there are 30,000 unified members. But the truth is that some of these gang members are friends with one another but many are not. There are 600+ gang factions of 50 to 250 individuals and they mostly beef with each other at a neighbourhood level.

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<sup>94</sup> Keith Cozart (b. 1995) is a recording artist from Chicago who is affiliated with the Black Disciples street gang. He performs drill music, a style of rap which is based upon trap music, a genre of urban music characterized by its bleak and gritty lyrical content, often about life in the retail drug trade. Cozart's lyrics often glorify violence.

“But, in the end, money trumps everything. Some guys grow out of the gang life. A lot of guys get to their mid-twenties or early thirties and begin to filter out. Some get jobs. Others get incarcerated. And those who don’t get jobs or get incarcerated for too long mature into the senior leadership. These guys tend to be the smarter ones. They’re harder to detect because they work as if they were running a business. They are responsible for the criminal enterprise part of the gang.”

Older gang members described a pattern of splintering and creating competing groups that stemmed from greed. Ignacio corroborated Officer Banner’s description of the fractionalization, describing a fracturing in his own Hispanic gang: “Back in the days, you could be Chi-Town, you could be Kart, you could be K-Town; and, you know, when we were together, we wasn’t showing animosity amongst ourselves. But things are changing now. People are changing. It’s the money. Either the money’s changing gangs or something’s changing us that we’re not as united as we used to be. Now we’re setting. Now we’re block cliquing. If you’re not from our block, it’s like, you know, ‘Man, if you come at us, we’re going to go at you.’” Likewise, one African American gang member, Doc, evoked the religious metaphor of the fall of Lucifer to describe the balkanization of the gangs in Chicago: “Folks and Peoples: it all started off as one. There was always one. Then you had one person that wanted more than what he was given. He wasn’t satisfied. Just like God and the devil.”

Underpinning this fractionalization is the inability of prison gangs to exercise their authority on the street. From the descriptions of gang life in prison I received, it became clear that in Illinois, the existing People and Folk federations used to have vertical control to the point that they had say on what happened on the street. However, once their leadership was decimated by the state, the gang structures flattened out and focused on prison solidarity, much like the emergence of the *Tangos* in Texas. Today, membership in a federation appears to be primarily a function of being incarcerated and the need for protection while incarcerated, and holds little importance in the street.

Just as in Texas and Arizona, protection is important for Illinois inmates. Many former inmates felt they had no choice but to join an inmate group given the severe disadvantages of attempting to do one’s time unaffiliated. Jay, a former GD from Chicago who was a member of the Folk Nation when incarcerated, noted that, if an inmate were a neutron, that is unaffiliated: “You got treated like crap. You got stolen from. People took your food, took your clothes. You didn’t have no protection. You was

on your own. [...] If me and my group of friends decided to push you around today, then we could push you around today because ain't no one going to help and stop [us]."

In other words, as in other large prison systems, joining a group meant joining a "survival unit," a group that is able to attack enemies and defend against them, operating much as the logic of a nation-state does (Elias 1978). However, unlike what historically has been the case in California, Texas, and Arizona, in Illinois, membership within these units does not involve a larger hierarchy that incorporates street gangs. Accordingly, there are few standing orders that come from the prisons to dictate the terms of a given faction. In fact, many warring groups may even be part of the same faction but only cooperate while incarcerated. The social control that vertical groups can exert on the streets is not a typical characteristic of horizontally organized prison gangs, meaning that while prison authorities may have more relative control in prisons, policing bodies may have to deal with more fractionalized criminal groups competing in the free world.

In Chicago, when someone is absent from the block for any protracted period of time, he is simply replaced. Tyrone, a long-time Vice Lord described being incarcerated and being free as being distinct in terms of one's gang life and identity: "When you come to the streets, like I said, it's two different worlds. Niggas in the streets get money, they aren't trying to hit that shit in the jail, you're free now. It's all about survival out here." Turnover is high in Chicago gangs, and those who go to prison are often soon forgotten. When a gang member is unable to work, his standing in the gang's hierarchy is lost. When a gang member goes to prison, he likely becomes a member of a prison gang; however, that membership does not seem to result in connections and respect that endure past the point of incarceration. When released, most inmates return to their neighbourhoods. If they are fortunate, there is a spot open for them and they can resume their activities. If not, they have to start over or fade out of importance in the context of the gang.

### ***The Retail Drug Trade: Confronting Risk***

With gangs still on the streets, the open-air markets in Chicago are still alive and well. Risk is an inherent part of the job. There are the risks of getting caught by the police, getting shot by an enemy, or getting stiffed by a client. Plus, according to police and gang members alike, the retail drug trade in Chicago is one that is highly

competitive, so there is a risk that if your product is not good, clients won't frequent your corner (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000).

As a result of the risks faced, an inverse relationship between the willingness to use violence and the value of the transactions develops. When transactions are small, they represent a large part of the seller's earnings over the short to medium term. Street sellers face the highest overall risk and defend their positions with proportional force to the potential loss, particularly against competitors. As one moves up the hierarchy, the overall risk burden lessens, as does visibility. Given that violence is visible, and the goal for successful drug dealers and traffickers is not to be visible, the likelihood that violence will be deployed as a tool of conflict resolution decreases as one moves up the dealing and gang hierarchy. In other words, as one moves up the hierarchy, each stop is a win in the tournament of the drug trade (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000).

The high risk of entry into the world of the narcotics dealing discourages some recruits. Matteo, a violence interrupter, introduced me to a clique, which included recruits who were both young and new. Matteo commented that should I return to the same house in four or five months, half of the kids I met that day would no longer be there; they would have returned to their lives prior to their gang involvement because they would not feel like the gang life was truly for them.

Nonetheless, the high risk of entry is appealing to other youths in that it provides a reward in terms of capital that these boys do not otherwise have access to. Plus, recruits tend to be quite young, immature, and unable to understand the gravity of the violent crimes they are going to commit<sup>95</sup>. Tyrone, a Travelling Vice Lord, joined the gang when he was in the eighth grade, some twenty-five years ago. "When I joined the organization I got a chance to get money. I got a chance to get a car, something I never really – I used to dream about cars when I was a little kid."

"How was this chance provided to you?" I asked.

"A job. I was offered a great job," Tyrone said.

"What was that job?"

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<sup>95</sup> District Commander Robert Casimir (not his real name) noted that the youth and inexperience of new gang members who are often behind shootings is one of the reasons that shootings are going up but fatalities had not been. 2016, a year after this observation was made, saw an enormous homicide spike in Chicago (Saul 2016).

“Selling narcotics.”

Tyrone described succinctly the struggle to “make it,” that many young people face. The idea of accessing capital that would otherwise be unattainable – in addition to receiving solidarity and comradery – is a theme that most the current and former gang members I spoke to cited in terms of their ascent. But one does not need to be a gang member to want more than what is available: the desire to earn more money than what her current ceiling appeared to be motivated June to accept Lisa’s offer.

As seen in other studies (Decker and Van Winkle 1996, Levitt and Venkatesh 2000), some of the young gang members I spoke to dreamed of becoming bigtime pushers. Danny was a low level gang member who had been in and out of prison several times in his young life. Going to prison frequently made it difficult for him to move up the gang’s hierarchy. He dreams of meeting a cartel member and possibly working for a trafficking organization so he can become rich. Nonetheless, he concedes that it is a difficult road: “I don’t have the money. I’ve got to build my empire before I can have enough money to approach a big connect. There are a lot of middle men and it’s hard to get around them. The middle men are easy to find and they could be anybody, blacks, neutrons, 2-6, regular white guys.”

Older gang members had measured expectations in terms of what they could expect from the drug trade; they recognized the ceilings of realistic attainment and their good fortune not to be in prison or dead. Mid-level players like Biggs and Ignacio seemed to describe a sweet spot, a point where one is above the street level and its quotidian risk of hand-to-hand sales in open air markets but below the gaze of law enforcement. This point involves handling middling quantities of product, decidedly less sexy than the amounts handled by their suppliers. Just as Biggs had left the heavy traffic behind him, Ignacio had no aspirations to move up from his current life: “Once you get older, it gets less [appealing]. You know, you start becoming slower.” He is trying to transition away from illicit enterprise: “I started working now. [...]t’s okay, but I guess the streets bring me more money.”

#### **Lesson 4: The money of the drug trade is hard to follow.**

The mid- and upper-level positions in a gang or dealing crew are difficult to achieve. Only the lucky few who survive or overcome the risks they face can climb from the bottom to these levels. Most gang members earn barely enough to survive and spend their proceeds directly into the economy for goods and services or to re-up their supply of product to sell (Naylor 2002, Levitt and Venkatesh 2000). Nonetheless, gangs

readily find newer and younger recruits willing to join, trading on the age-old recruitment tactic that recognizes that young boys without direction are always looking for guidance, acceptance, and status.

The few successful members that are invariably in any long-lasting clique allure youngsters. These lucky ones make so much money that they need to dispose of it. Finding these people was difficult since the successful ones keep out of sight at all costs. Even Biggs and Ignacio did not make enough money to need to undertake complicated laundering processes: Biggs invested in music production and Ignacio paid bills for his



Photo 15: A street corner in a neighbourhood with a significant gang presence.

numerous children. The relatively small amounts of these transactions were below suspicion.

What happens to the money seems to be largely ignored by the press; that side of illicit enterprise is decidedly less sensational than drug busts. Nonetheless, according to the law enforcement personnel with whom I spoke, there is the occasional drug dealer who earns enough to need to launder his money with clear and consistent methods. Often times, these individuals are associated with the gangs that have the best connections, such as the Latin Kings. According to Ms. George, one of the agents at the Chicago HIDTA, Hispanic gangs, generally speaking, are more likely to have the institutional knowledge required to get rid of excess funds: “The Latin Kings are business oriented. They engage in activities like money laundering. Some of them own money services. They are married with kids but still fulfil a role for the gangs. Such individuals evolve. They go from being gang members to [illicit entrepreneurs] engaging in behaviours which mirror traditional organized crime. Some of these entrepreneurs who operate at the fringes of the formal economy turn legitimate over time.” According to the agents, a couple of Chicago’s favourite Mexican restaurants were originally fronts for the Herrera Family’s network which have, over time, gone straight.

Today, the smarter gang members have diversified their criminal activities. “They’ve gotten better at ID theft and credit card theft,” explained Ms. George. “They’ve gotten organized to commit mortgage fraud<sup>96</sup> and invest in real estate, generally. They’ve gotten better at fencing stolen products; their schemes are more sophisticated. By sophisticated, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are more technologically advanced; it’s more likely the case that the criminals engage in ever more complicated behaviours. They may innovate new communication techniques that are more difficult to trace.

“Or, being that Chicago is a cash consolidation point, those involved in the drug trade might develop complex financial transactions, such as setting up and engaging in a hawala<sup>97</sup>-type system of underground money exchange that circumvents the need to

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<sup>96</sup> Ms. George opined that the “Cash for Houses” billboards that are now commonplace might sometimes be underwritten by individuals who have surplus money from the drug trade and need to dump it somewhere.

<sup>97</sup> “Hawala is an alternative or parallel remittance system. It exists and operates outside of,

move money physically across international borders by using a system of brokers to settle accounts. Though this system was used by the Colombian drug trafficking organizations, where it was known as the “Black Market Peso Exchange,” it marks a departure from the “money smurfs” where transactions are structured, that is broken up into small amounts. The hawala system eliminates the need for such a work-around (and its cost) since the money doesn’t actually need to move. It results in trade based money laundering.”

Mick Dumke echoed what the HIDTA agents claimed. As he investigated drug rings in Chicago, he saw drug dealers reinvest their proceeds into different ventures, such as real estate, in order to launder their money and ensure that their windfalls were not squandered. Officer Surfer noted this trend as well: “I’ve followed gang members now for 20 years and I’ve seen them move from house to house to house, and they’re getting stopped by suburban departments for some traffic violation, and I’m thinking what’s bringing them out there? [Real estate]. They invest like any other gang; they invest their stuff in car washes, laundry mats, strip clubs. A lot of our black gangs put money into recording [ studios... The investments are in businesses that help them] launder their money [...] You never know how many cars you’re washing in a car wash.”

Clancy Malone, a former commander of narcotics in CPD, had seen other ways of disposing funds in his time working the beat: “Some of the upper-level guys [...] try and legitimize their money. The simplest way is, for example, I know that one guy on the street, if you had a winning lottery ticket, like the quick pick or whatever, you’d go to him, he’d pay a ten percent more on it. So, you won \$500.00, he’d give you \$550.00, and then he would [cash] it, ‘I’m the luckiest motherfucker on the planet; I keep winning these lotteries,’ or they go to the casino. Some guys have legitimate businesses, tow trucking business, cash businesses, hot-dog stands, restaurants.”

Even as the success rate of criminal entrepreneurs is relatively low, the consistent reporting of laundering strategies by law enforcement indicates that it is a

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or parallel to ‘traditional’ banking or financial channels. It was developed in India, before the introduction of Western banking practices, and is currently a major remittance system used around the world. [...] The components of hawala that distinguish it from other remittance systems are trust and the extensive use of connections such as family relationships or regional affiliations. Unlike traditional banking [...], hawala makes minimal (often no) use of any sort of negotiable instrument. Transfers of money take place based on communications between members of a network of hawaladars, or hawala dealers” (Jost and Sandhu 2003, 5).



facet of the drug trade in Chicago. What is less clear is the capacity for local law enforcement to respond to their hunches. While the HIDTA's job is to run up the chain and follow up leads, local police appear to be overburdened with their day-to-day affairs.

### *CHICAGO IS ITS OWN ANIMAL*

As Paulina, one of the HIDTA agents I spoke to, remarked: "Chicago is its own animal." Although Chicago has been used to describe sociological phenomena for the better part of the past century, what happens in Chicago in the modern drug trade is a departure from what can be seen elsewhere, given the convergence of a unique gang and prison gang development in the city, a history of immigration which has facilitated a few effective traffickers to set up shop over the years, a qualitatively different taste for drugs, and an evolution of violence which is distinct from El Paso and Phoenix.

Nonetheless, some of the lessons from Chicago are universal. Poverty breeds a will to succeed by whatever means necessary. The struggle to survive and succeed underpins some of the choices that individuals make that result in their entry to, and protracted stay within, the drug trade. The stories of why youths joined gangs varied little in each of the field sites: a lack of family structure and opportunity at home, and the acceptance, nurturing, and apparent economic opportunity that the streets provide, all contributed to a gang's allure.

Despite these commonalities, Chicago, when compared to other sites, shows us that the issues that surround the drug trade – poverty, a lack of family structure, a lack of economic opportunity, distrust in the police, demonization of the 'other' – need solutions that are tailored to the varying contexts of different cities. All of these contexts exist in the margins of society, but the social organization of day to day interactions and criminal interactions within these margins differs from place to place. There are no cookie cutter solutions; all solutions require an understanding of the varying elements of the illicit drug market, which starts with an understanding of the social organization of the drug trade and the motivations of the people who participate within it.

## TEN: ILLICIT ENTERPRISE IN THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY

By focusing on the social organization of the drug trade in the United States, this work examines the markets, organizations, and people involved, and the relationships that exist between each of these entities across different significant settings. As such, this study illustrates that the rhetorical fearmongering, namely that Mexican DTOs are taking over American cities, has no real evidential basis. Mexican DTOs are not controlling the streets of any city nor are hordes of unauthorized immigrants flooding the country for the sole or primary purpose of pushing dope on innocent Americans, as the present iteration of the alien conspiracy suggests. The drug trade, moreover, cannot be generalized in terms of what it is and how it behaves neither at the wholesale nor the retail levels. Drug control policy, accordingly, must consider the local dynamics if it is to have any chance at impeding the drug trade.

What exists is a flexible network of actors who may endure in the network for various lengths of time and who work towards supplying the ongoing demand for illicit drugs in various U.S. markets. This network operates largely in the margins of society, which, depending on context, may be very wide or quite narrow. Throughout the supply chain for illicit drugs, different kinds of organizations develop, including subcontracted transportation organizations and prison gangs, both of which serve as important conduits for distributing product to retailers. These organizations exploit the comparative advantages that allow them to be effective in the portion of the network they operate. Clearly, in the drug trade, there are many organized crimes that occur, in that actors work with each other in order to complete their illicit tasks which include not only moving and selling drugs but also, especially at the wholesale levels, disposing of the proceeds of these activities.

Relationships that occur between organizations often follow a “contractor” model where better positioned actors effectively insulate themselves by subcontracting riskier acts to others who are willing to take on risk in exchange for the opportunity to participate in the network and earn. Yet, equally clear is that not everyone participating in the drug trade, particularly those at the lower levels of the supply chain, know who they are working for or with. This phenomenon further undercuts the idea that a singular, large, organized group dominates the drug supply chain vertically throughout the U.S. While wholesalers experience a degree of stability, they too remain vulnerable.

The gears of nearly every part of the drug trade's machinery are largely interchangeable.

Furthermore, this work explored the role of violence in the drug trade at its different levels, showing that violence is unlikely to occur when profits are at high risk. Ultimately, this study underscores the robustness of the drug trade and how the drug trade is a market economy that responds quite well to challenges to the supply chain and constricting factors that appear depending on the local settings.

In each setting, the most successful, that is, the most enduring, criminal actors generally work towards sustaining the supply chain's longevity by instituting social control policies which serve as mechanisms that encourage participants to minimize risk and keep the supply chain functioning even when individual links occasionally fail. Many, though certainly not all, of the individuals who make up the enterprises which largely buttress the drug trade are people who come from the margins of society; they are people who, for whatever reason, don't see a way out of their circumstances except via the dream that promises them, often falsely, the riches of becoming a somebody in the drug trade. Nonetheless, what holds the drug trade together at its various junctions along the supply chain is a system of protection that responds to local dynamics.

This work demonstrates that the organization of the drug supply networks depends upon the ability of the smaller wholesalers and transporters who supply the retail trade to create connections with their suppliers. Such opportunities decay over space, which indicates how important settings are to the organization of the drug trade. Plus, in evaluating the drug trade in three separate settings, this work illustrates that Chicago, despite its prominence in sociological and criminological inquiry, possesses attributes which make it exceptional rather than representational of big cities, particularly as we consider the drug trade.

This study employed a methodology that allowed quick access to law enforcement personnel who police the drug trade, members of the communities most affected by the drug trade, and current and former criminals who participated in the drug trade. Their perspectives enabled a description of the drug trade from the wholesale level as it enters the United States through to the retail level as it hits the street and informed a history from below of the drug trade as it exists in three sites, each with distinct settings. This approach provides comparative insight into a complicated issue that is often discussed at the national level of analysis. Moreover, it

explores the push and pull factors which participants in the drug trade face and how they respond to these factors within their local contexts.

Additionally, this history was collected in a timeframe that although abbreviated proved effective. It allowed for valid comparisons among the sites, along with an understanding of the events and sequences that characterize the drug supply chain within the U.S., and how these events and sequences change according to the different settings of each site, thus providing a shifting view of “organized crime” in each location. It allowed for the collection of sufficient data for a nuanced representation of the drug trade whose details were triangulated by taking accounts from varying, unrelated sources.

More than ever, in an era where rhetoric rather than reason sways public opinion, we must contest the dominant narrative that portrays an ever-present risk of violent, farm-to-arm drug trafficking organizations and challenge discussions that focus on organized crime and its dangers without considering local settings and how to interrupt the events that propagate the problems. As members of the public, we must understand how the drug trade works and refocus the discourse by demanding that policies be developed which take the drug trade’s architecture into consideration. Such a strategy will better problematize and respond to issues surrounding the drug trade.

### *BREAKING DOWN THE DRUG TRADE: REVISITING ITS SETTINGS, EVENTS, AND THEIR SEQUENCES*

The drug trade continues, quite simply, because there is a demand for the illicit products it provides and a profit-to-risk ratio that motivates illicit enterprises not only to enter the market place but also to remain in business. In this thesis, I have explored the market dynamics which affect the behaviours of the illicit enterprises. Principally, I have shown that protection, manifested in several forms, underwrites the drug trade. However, to deconstruct the drug trade, it is helpful to consider the settings, events, and their sequences that occur in each of my field sites. By doing so, I evaluate the four questions posed at the beginning of this work: what kinds of organizations participate in the drug trade; how do they participate; who makes up these organizations; and, finally, what are the relationships between these organizations and the people within them?

#### **Settings Matter**

In the context of the relationships that underwrite the drug trade, undoubtedly, setting matters; it influences the formation and behaviour of an organization. The way

actors are organized in the drug trade in Mexico and the U.S. is different and influenced by the relative absence and presence of state control in each. Mexico's primary drug activity is trafficking. The local Mexican drug markets pale in comparison to the lucrative markets north of the border. Accordingly, the preeminent organization type present in the Mexican drug trade is the drug trafficking organization, which competes for the ability to conduct "transit crime" (Kleemans 2007), that is moving wholesale amounts of products through the country and delivering them to partners in the U.S., who then transport the products farther inland before serving other wholesalers or large retailers.

The importance of wholesaling to the Mexican drug trade makes Mexican border cities valuable points of entry to the U.S., and DTOs have demonstrated a willingness to monopolize these cities by using gruesome violence to squeeze out their competitors, a task which in recent years has been outsourced to paramilitary-inspired groups, like the Zetas, or gangs, like Barrio Azteca. Individuals who want to participate in the drug trade join organizations accessible through their social networks. To become a member of a DTO, an individual needs to be from a community where one exists and have an existing connection to a current member. Joining gangs appears to be relatively easier: the only requisite for street gang membership is a desire to join, while a prison gang is a community that has historically coalesced within the prison walls in response to failures of the state to provide adequate protection.

The everyday social dynamics of border towns, whereby the populations on either side of the border have strong relationships with each other, often with families and commercial interests spanning the divide, are repeated within the social structures of the drug trade. In a border town like El Paso, no local drug dealer is far removed from a reasonably good supplier, provided he has a history in the area. Should a drug connection break, a local is likely able to replace it without too much effort. Transplants and people without the social ties that bridge the border face more difficulty in building such relationships.

Each of the sites studied serves two purposes in the context of the drug trade: it offers domestic retail markets and it serves as a staging ground for wholesale transshipment. However, the importance of these two purposes changes markedly across the three sites. In El Paso, the local retail market is relatively small and focuses on heroin, so most of the product that passes through the city continues onward. The smuggling operations of El Paso likely focus primarily on moving wholesale amounts

and remitting the proceeds of sales. The most visible El Paso organization, Barrio Azteca, fulfills a dual role when it sometimes smuggles wholesale quantities of heroin to supply its virtual monopoly of the city's retail trade. It remains to be seen what the impact on the retail market will be in the light of Barrio Azteca's dimming star and the rise of the Tangos throughout Texas.

Moving away from the border, the balance between a city as a retail market and a staging ground shifts, and organizations appear to specialize in either wholesale/transportation or retailing. This specialization is due in part to the decay of retailers' potential connections with wholesalers over space. In other words, a decreasing number of well-positioned people facilitate the wholesale trade the farther one moves from the U.S.-Mexico border. Phoenix illustrates this phenomenon; although Phoenix is less than 200 miles from the border, finding a connection to a wholesaler is more difficult for an average retailer compared to retailers in El Paso.

Phoenix balances its roles as a local market and transshipment point. It has a robust local market for methamphetamines and heroin. A significant amount of these products stops in Phoenix for distribution, resulting in events where wholesalers supply retailers, sometimes via the Mexican Mafia, who then supply retail customers. Given its position on the intersection of Interstate 10 and Interstate 17, Phoenix is a good transshipment point, meaning that product can be easily shifted to markets east, west, and north of the city. Accordingly, Phoenix's location is a prime setting for events related to the wholesale trade, such as staging and transferring drugs to other smugglers who move the product on to more lucrative markets farther away. Additionally, the prevalence of staging in Phoenix results in the existence of rip crews, which attempt to steal wholesale amounts.

In Chicago, the city's importance as a retail market dwarfs its importance as a staging ground. While small market retailers go to Chicago to buy product to sell, the demand for cocaine and heroin on the Chicago streets generates significant profits for retailers, when taken on aggregate. The retail market provides an organizational response that consists of several cliques, competing to serve customers, often using violence to establish primacy in a territory. The wholesalers of Chicago are elusive to most retailers. When most retailers in Chicago receive a wholesale quantity, it is a relatively small quantity of product compared to their counterparts in Phoenix and El Paso. Plus the product they receive is more likely to be adulterated. While some small-time gang members dream of climbing the ranks and becoming kingpins, those dreams

are largely abandoned by the old heads who have survived the gruelling life of a person whose money comes primarily from the drug trade and who understands that the risks of such a position likely outweigh the benefits of holding it.

In sum, the drug supply chain includes several actors – namely wholesalers, traffickers, prison gangs, street gangs, and small-time dealers. The differences in setting influence the prominence of one group of actors in a given market and the economic endeavours they engage in, meaning that while we can study parts of the supply chain in a given space, it is difficult to generalize the mechanics of the supply chain for all markets. Settings also dictate an individual's ability to move up through the ranks of the drug trade and engage in different endeavours, with mobility through the ranks becoming significantly harder as distance from the border grows. Settings also influence how tangential activities associated with the drug trade unfold, such as the provision of protection.

### **Protection as a Market and an Ongoing “Event”**

Across the three sites, the drug trade functioned primarily in the margins of society which are spaces that are often in flux. In the spaces where drugs are trafficked and dealt, the degree of marginality that a community experiences is a function of how well the state can affect control and provide its denizens protection. In the marketplace, protection is fundamental to any action, licit or illicit. There is a static demand for protection; the only question is: “Who will provide it?” Viewed as a process, or to return to Marcus Felson's (2006) terminology, as an ongoing “event,” the provision of protection is a continuous event that unfolds with different sequences. As seen in Mexico and elsewhere that has weak governance, when the state fails to provide protection, criminal entrepreneurs fill the void and provide both licit and illicit forms of protection. In the case of Mexico, violence occurs without the state providing sufficient checks or adequate responses to the criminal violence.

Accordingly, the violent acts that DTOs perpetrate in Mexico signal to the denizens of the margins that they must develop a sense of fear whereby they internalize an understanding that no matter their response, they lose. If community members report crime, they die. If they keep their mouths shut, they may survive, but they live in a community blighted by the drug trade. The discouragement which results deters members of the affected communities from engaging with the police. The long history of police corruption in Mexico makes improving the public trust in police a difficult, long-term project, given the ongoing failures of the police to investigate and

deter the violent acts that have come to characterize the worst of Mexico's crime. The emergence of *autodefensas*, armed civilian organizations which claim to contest drug trafficking organizations, but are often labelled criminal actors by the state, is one response that communities have put forward. Nonetheless, as violence finds new theatres in Mexico, the state struggles to fulfil its obligation to protect its citizens. Comparatively, the U.S. responds to large-scale violence better than Mexico. Consequently, criminal entrepreneurs in the U.S. attempt to maintain lower profiles in order to maximize the success of their illicit enterprises, a practice which makes fear of spillovers fundamentally unfounded.

It is also important to consider the value that gets added to an illicit product when it passes through a check point. The biggest immediate jump of the value of illegal drugs occurs the moment it crosses the U.S. Mexico border. Smuggling organizations prefer to maintain a steady flow of product coming in with as little disturbance to that flow as possible. Accordingly, given the sensitivity to violent acts on the border, violence, when it is necessary to be done on the U.S. side of the border, is done out of sight and with as little collateral damage as possible.

Charles Bowden once told me that experience had taught him that the farther one gets from the US-Mexico border, the more difficult it becomes to find people who can assess the dangers associated with it appropriately. Despite what vigilantes who patrol the U.S. border, like the Minute Men, might claim, law enforcement responds quickly, particularly when violence is involved. Bowden's adage rang true in my experience; in El Paso, I never met anyone who was afraid of encountering violence in crossing the border despite having concerns of being harmed should they go to Juárez.

Although police attention increases the risk and cost of doing business in the U.S., the U.S. has many communities which are at the margins of society. In these communities, trust of law enforcement remains tenuous. Whether the relationship between community and the police is a positive one influences whether any given denizen picks up the phone to report a crime. In my neighbourhood in Phoenix, the police who responded to my call said that my neighbours would more than likely say nothing; there was little point for the police to continue investigating the burglary of my house. That sentiment was common in Latino communities, like Guadalupe, that felt targeted by the rhetoric of the Maricopa County Sheriff at the time, Joe Arpaio. In Chicago, members of communities with a gang presence seemed torn in their support of the police. As the newly set up Police Accountability Task Force's first report



indicated, the department has a reputation of being violent, unaccountable, and responding in ways that are against the wishes of a community (Police Accountability Task Force 2016), which means that, often, people who live in such communities are reluctant to report crime (Kirk and Papachristos 2011).

In short, when a community views the police as overbearing, illegitimate, or antithetical to its interests, its members are less likely to engage in an action that gives law enforcement cause to enter the neighbourhood. To that end, a community's refusal to assist the state's efforts to affect control sustains that community in the margins of society, indicating the state's fundamental failure to provide adequate and effective protection while allowing illicit enterprise to continue to function. Overcoming these feelings is a struggle that law enforcement must undertake; most police clearly stated that developing good community relationships was critical to their job, which fundamentally is protecting communities from the negative effects of illicit enterprises.

In the prison setting, this study shows that historically the state has engaged in two types of behaviour. One strategy attempts to assert more control by cracking down on prisoner solidarity organizations. The other strategy relinquishes control and allows such organizations to self-police to an extent, while the state asserts only the minimum necessary to keep prisoners within the walls and responds to only the most serious grievances. When the state controls the inside of prison, by providing a regimented structure that does not tolerate prisoner solidarity organizations, much less prison gangs, illicit enterprise that still manages to exist within prison tends to be of the mom and pop variety with only well connected individuals fulfilling underground market demands.

When the state chooses not to, or is unable to, control the inside of prison, then in prisons where prisoners feel protection from other prisoners is necessary, prison gangs blossom from the solidarity groups that initially form. These resulting protection rackets lead to the development of gangs which can build further criminal enterprises, such as trafficking drugs or other contraband within the prison walls and running illegal stores to sell goods to other inmates.

Undoubtedly, the street is a dynamic place in terms of protection. While the state is supposed to monopolize violence as a function of its sovereignty, in the margins of society, such a monopoly does not exist. Outside the firm grasp of the state's control, as we have seen, the protection prisoners establish in prison can extend onto the street. As prison gang members return to their communities, a new code of practice

becomes normalized, and the prison gang imposes social control onto the underground actors of the streets who run in the same circles.

The provision of protection that prison gangs offer comes with clearly established rules that must be followed on the street so long as those prison gangs maintain standing within the jail and prison system. When a member of the criminal underworld violates those rules, and then when that person, or someone close to that person, is eventually incarcerated, prison gangs mete out the punishment. The informal social control that prison gangs can impose onto street gangs has decreased violence in the streets of El Paso and Phoenix. Yet, in Chicago, the lack of informal social control imposed by prison gangs appears to have allowed the balkanization of street gangs. As the ongoing conflict of Chicago street gangs goes unchecked, violence continues to be a defining characteristic of Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods. Notably, when strong prison gangs are allowed to exist in carceral settings, the staging ground for violent retribution gets relocated from being principally on the street to being principally in jails and prisons. Settings like El Paso and Phoenix, in which there is a strong gang presence in prison, appear to have these organizations effectively implement social control in the margins of society where the state does not operate efficiently. This results in less visible violence compared to places like Chicago, where gangs in prison are weak and have little influence on street politics.

However, as shown with the process of "smokescreening," protection also may be created through the allusion to violence rather than explicit displays of force. The smokescreening sequence that actors undertake to ensure that their customers cannot turn them in should they be caught by the police is a direct response to the police's past success in running up the supply chain and getting the low hanging fruit to cooperate by providing information that allows the police to pursue larger players in exchange for more lenient sentences. Furthermore, smokescreening can create the illusion that a violent group is behind the transaction to help encourage compliance with the norms of the transaction, such as how to pay and how to interact with the delivery people.

### *Violence and Money*

In brief, protection allows for illicit enterprise to build and expand. This fact results in an inverse relationship between violence and transactional value. At the very bottom of the supply chain exist individuals who are trying to enter and work their way up the hierarchy. Accordingly, when there are few checks on their behaviour, as is the case in Chicago, petty disputes can result in high-violence resolutions.

The need to defend the block is critical to the people who sell from the corner; losing that position means an end – or at least an intolerable interruption – to their ability to sell product and generate their meagre incomes. Street-level dealers are the least protected people of the entire supply chain. On one hand, they are the most visible, making them vulnerable to arrest. On the other, they are the most replaceable, meaning that, so long as the demand to work the corner remains high, given the illusions of future wealth, an organization can afford the loss of any given street-level dealer since anyone can be substituted into that unskilled role. Violence appears to decrease as one moves up the supply chain in the U.S. (Mexico has a different array of considerations due to the state's relative inability to affect control.) In high-level drug settings, where significant money and volume are at stake, violence is possible but unlikely given the attention such actions receive in the U.S. and the interruption to commerce that such attention would likely bring.

When social control reduces the ability to engage in overt, visible violence as a means to protect one's retail market share, as is the case in Phoenix, the street-level drug trade moves off the corner and into a trap house. Prison gangs, when they affect social control in the streets, can shift the locus of problem resolution from the street to the jails and prisons where they have a presence. Accordingly, violence on the street decreases because it is meted out to those who violate the rules and end up incarcerated. Certainly, in El Paso and Phoenix violence has not been eradicated from the street and violence remains a threat, though its employment is judicious. Retaliation remains the primary reason for much of the violence that occurs on the street, be it an attack by one organization on another or an attack on thieves, as is the case of rip crews. The role of social control as it is implemented not only by the state but also by criminal actors underscores the importance of protection in determining how business in the illicit market place gets conducted. Simply put, when violence undercuts profitability, most illicit entrepreneurs acting rationally will use it minimally. And, when U.S.-based actors deem violence to be necessary, they use it judiciously, without the theatrics that accompanied the violent acts that occurred during the height of Mexico's violence.

The presence of violence threatens those who have the most capital to lose: wholesalers. In the U.S., if a wholesale operation were to use visible displays of violence, the chances of law enforcement encountering a valuable load of product increases. It appears that many drug smugglers in the U.S. are merely subcontractors

for the Mexican DTOs, having picked up the product in Mexico and transported it into the U.S. These smugglers keep a low profile to avoid scenarios which would lead to their losing their product. These smuggling organizations don't appear to have developed security apparatuses and rely on groups like prison gangs to provide security when facing higher risk situations, such as staging product. Accordingly, many of those who have the most to lose in terms of product are more likely to pay for protection rather than attempt to take it over, since any protracted conflict would provide an opening to a competing group. In these instances, conflict equates money lost and the potential for the enterprise to go bust.

The street provides visibility and leaves one open to potential assailants. As one rises in the hierarchy, one faces the risk of being taken down by law enforcement in search of a trophy. The sweet spot is that place in the hierarchy where one can earn a reasonable income with little exposure to violence. Only seasoned veterans who understand the most likely endgames – death and long-term prison sentences – appreciate the value of this position and are content to remain there.

The existence of this sweet spot brings the relationship between the organization and its people into sharp focus. For many members, gangs provide a sense of community that they crave, making the notion of venturing out on one's own unpalatable. Higher membership in the organization may distance a member from the risk that low-ranking individuals face. Ultimately, the organization provides a structure that helps facilitate the retail drug trade by providing a semblance of protection for the sellers and a structure to serve a market. However, the number of people who participate in the drug trade at any level are still few in comparison to the general population, meaning that the panic associated with the folk devils of the drug trade needs to be kept in context when policymakers develop strategies that will interrupt the events that propagate the drug trade. Strategies which alienate the broader sections of the margins, where drug trade actors are currently operating, will make policing those margins more difficult and ultimately benefit criminal entrepreneurs.

### *REVISITING THE RHETORIC*

This project ends where it began: considering the rhetoric of the drug trade and those who are involved. Over the course of the four years that I have spent studying this topic, the rhetoric continued virtually unimpeded. Harm reduction is becoming more common place, and marijuana legalization initiatives have been successful in a few states. In 2016, Joe Arpaio finally lost his bid for re-election; targeting Latinos

worked against him. Yet, the threat narrative continues, with Mexico remaining a target of Trumpian ire, which nurtures the trumped-up concerns that have no basis in empirical fact.

In examining the drug trade in places where it is allegedly quite bad, I saw little evidence to suggest that U.S. local law enforcement has ceded control of a city or a significant area to DTOs. Organizations within the drug trade connect with one another through the relationships forged between people. When considering the wholesale trade, there is no uniform pattern throughout the U.S. in terms of how these connections are forged. Generally speaking, it appears that the relationships that underwrite the drug trade ultimately decay the farther one gets from the border and migrant communities. That being said, there is no overarching organization that controls even a majority of the supply chain. Indeed, a very small number of people are required to set up a criminal enterprise in the drug trade; as a proportion, those immigrants who do so are a tiny minority compared to those immigrants who come to live their lives within the confines of the law.

While the state may not aid the margins of society in a manner which induces a trustful relationship between the state and the communities within those margins, in the American context, the state still responds adequately enough to dissuade large-scale drug-related violence like that which is seen in Mexico and elsewhere. It must be emphasized that the warning of Father Myers, the priest in Guadalupe, Arizona, that when studying these phenomena, we should not lose a sense of perspective, runs true. Despite the massive estimates in terms of criminal proceeds attributed to the drug trade, the number of people involved in any given community, and particularly as a percentage of any given society at large, is quite small. Nonetheless, the actions of a few can have a disproportionate impact on a community, particularly when rhetoric amplifies the threat.

What is equally clear is that stopping the drug trade via enforcement alone – where success is measured purely as curbing market supply with an eye towards eradication – is a failed tactic. Despite the occasional successes whereby stash houses are uncovered, gang members are arrested, big trafficking networks, like the Flores Twins DTO, are disbanded, and Mexican-based DTO heads like Chapo Guzmán are captured and extradited, law enforcement is staring at an evolving machine that learns from its past errors and strives to improve its design to better protect itself and its

business interests. The drug trade plods on, and while the actors who partake in it may change, their histories are eerily similar.

What does change is the role of violence. To suppress violence, the state may need to respond efficiently enough to serious acts and possibly tolerate the informal social control of criminal actors in the margins of society where the state is unwilling or unable to police. It may be time to revisit the integration that occurred with the old European-based gangs of Chicago and elsewhere in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and ask whether they can impose informal social control that can be integrated later into a formal structure, thus reducing the size of the margins of society. Each of the settings studied within this work indicate that the drug trade functions in those very margins of society that provide opportunity to the criminal underbelly. The protection market that emerges in these settings is a product of a community's marginalization. It is an indication of the state's failure not only to affect control but also to provide sufficient economic opportunities in licit enterprise so that those who live in the margins can move up the social ladder.

#### *WHAT NEXT?*

Though I might call for efforts to reduce the margins of society, the Trump presidency marks an era of renewed law-and-order rhetoric which will cause increased marginalization. Police increasingly find themselves in positions where they are scrutinised in the communities they are policing, particularly as the mainstream media sheds light on the police killings of unarmed people of colour and as technology enables the recording and reporting of police misconduct. As those on the margins are pushed further away from mainstream society, the space available for illicit enterprises to manoeuvre will increase. The failure of the state to protect all of its denizens, especially those who are the furthest away from middle-class safety, will always lead to a market opening for protection, and thus an open invitation for illicit enterprise to form and grow. For at least some of those in the margins, the opportunities which illicit enterprises offer will always be attractive despite their risks.

Though this study examined three sites, there remains room for further investigation. First, additional, multisited studies can help us better map how illicit enterprises, like the drug trade, work within and between a wider array of settings. More research needs to be done on the social control that prisoner organizations impose on street crime. Building on this work, it is necessary to examine the evolution of the social order of prisons in Texas, where the Tangos appear to be gaining a greater

share of the protection market within prison. It will be important to further study and attempt to understand how the changes in the provision of protection affect the relationships of the wholesale and retail drug trade if policy is to reflect the shifts in the events that underwrite the drug trade.

Second, other urban areas ought to be examined to understand whether inmate organizations affect local crime patterns by instating rules and enforcing them. To date, most research has focused on Illinois, New York, Texas, Arizona, and California; future research should expand beyond these five states. For instance, little research to date has examined what happens in smaller carceral settings, such as those in the mountain west or Appalachia, and how their policies might affect crime in those communities. The changes regarding how protection is served within prison may help explain the shifts in the use of violence for remediation over time.

Third, rural communities are often in the margins of the public view. They are not immune to drug use and have historical problems with it, coupled with histories of unemployment, undereducation, and social stagnation, which are characteristics of the margins of society. However, we know relatively little about how these communities are served, how and why their tastes in drugs have changed over time, what kinds of organizations operate there, and how those actors are or are not part of the network described in this work.

Finally, if the problems associated with the drug trade are to be ameliorated, we must continue to study its mechanics and develop an understanding of why new generations enter its structures. The goal of policy makers ought to be to discourage young people from getting involved, not through punitive measures which historically have failed, but by ensuring that better opportunities are available and that young people recognize them as such. Accomplishing this goal may feel like a Sisyphean task, but it is one that we must continue to strive towards for the betterment of our communities.

## EPILOGUE: TRAINSPOTTING

I had visited my mother in Springfield, Illinois, for one last time before heading off again. The train to Chicago was crowded; I squeezed on with my bags. There were no seat assignments, so I had to sit wherever there was a free spot. Most people gave me a look as if to say, “Don’t you *dare* sit next to me.” There didn’t seem to be any friendly faces in the front of the car, so I tried my luck further back.

A young man was sitting next to a window, listening to his tunes. He saw me looking for a place and emphatically patted the empty seat next to him, moving his stuff to let me know it was fine to sit there. I put my things on the overhead rack and sat down. I thanked him and made small talk. He was a labourer from St. Louis, Missouri, headed to North Dakota to work on a construction site on the oil patch. He had a long trip ahead of him; he would be arriving at his destination sometime the following afternoon.

After a few minutes, our conversation trailed off. He put his head next to the window to doze; I pulled my computer out to work. An hour or two went by. Suddenly, I realized he was reading over my shoulder and I glanced over.

“What is it that you’re working on?” he asked me.

“Well, I study drug cartels,” I told him.

His eyes perked up and he seemed to be quite interested. He had never met someone who was working on a doctorate before and he found it fascinating that someone could spend so much time just thinking about one subject.

“So, why did you even start working on this stuff?”

“I was frustrated about how much nonsense seems to get said in the news. I mean, what does the public actually know about how it all works? For instance, what comes into your head when I ask you about the drug cartels?”

“Heroin. Because that’s what I use,” my fellow traveller said, taking me on an unexpected turn. I would never have guessed. The guy seated next to me was a far cry from the emaciated heroin users that I had met in the shooting gallery of Juárez. He was big; he looked strong.

“Yeah, man, I’ve got some medicine. I’m trying to give it up, but it’s hard. You know. You’ve met some junkies before, I’m sure.”

I nodded, kind of dazed that even as I prepared to leave, I was still learning.



“So, if you don’t mind me asking, what kind of heroin do you do?”

“Tar.”

“You never see powder? No China White? No Mexican brown?”

“Nah, man. Just the tar. That’s all I ever see anymore.”

“Is it hard to get?”

“No, not really. I just go to my guy, you know, and I get a fix.”

“Is he a gang member?”

“Sometimes you have to go to them, but nah. I’ve got a guy I trust. Another white guy.”

“Wow; is it expensive? Some folks have been telling me the dope comes from Chicago and then goes back down south. I hear it’s more expensive in St. Louis than up here.”

“Well, I’d say you’ve been told right. It’s more expensive down there. Maybe two or three times as much as what I could get in Chicago. Plus, it’s not as pure. I can get better stuff in Chicago.”

“You get stuff in Chicago sometimes?”

“Yeah, man. I’ve got two hours between my trains. I can tell you right now that I’ve got twenty bucks in my pocket and in that two hours I’ll get some heroin and I’ll be back on the train. It’ll be one last time, you know, before I start the medicine. It’s really hard to get stuff in North Dakota. I mean *really* hard, man. In a way, it’s good that I’m going. I might finally get off of this shit.”

“You’re not afraid to go to the ‘hood to get some dope? How do they know you’re not a cop?”

“I look the part, man. They know. They deal with junkies every day. And that’s what I am: a junkie. They take one look at me and they know I’m no cop. I mean, look at me. I’ve got the marks on my arm. What cop would go through that effort?”

“Up in Chicago, all people talk about is powder. Do you switch it up when you come here?”

“No. If you know where to look, you can get what you’re looking for. It’s no big deal.”

With that comment, I realized that there was still so much more than what I knew, than what I could possibly know. It was a reminder that there is always more to learn and that a complete, perfect story is next to impossible to get. The conversation

moved on; we talked about other things for the last half hour of the journey: music, sports, and Mount Rushmore, chatting away until the train pulled into Union Station.

# APPENDIX A: DOJ OBSERVATION POLICY FOR IMMIGRATION COURT

It is summed up in the following Department of Justice release (Executive Office for Immigration Review 2010):

**Department of Justice**  
Executive Office for Immigration Review

Thursday, September 9, 2010

## Observing Immigration Court Hearings

The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) conducts immigration court hearings in 59 immigration courts nationwide. Immigration court hearings are generally open to the public.

Immigration hearings may be closed to the public because:

- The immigration judge closed the hearing to protect witnesses, parties, or the public interest;
- The immigration judge granted a motion the parties filed to close a hearing; or
- The case involves:
  - An abused spouse or child;
  - Information that is protected by a protective order; or
  - An application for asylum, withholding of removal relief, or Convention Against Torture protections.

Before going to observe an open hearing, please note that:

- You do not need to notify the immigration court in advance to observe an open hearing. When planning to observe an open hearing held within a detention facility, however, you should contact the detention facility in advance to learn of any security clearance requirements for entry to the building.
- No cameras or recording devices are allowed in the courtroom.
- When courtroom space is limited, the news media has priority over the general public.

## APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

### *THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNDERWORLD*

Every activity has its vocabulary, its jargon, and its abbreviations. The underworld is no different. With the exception of the few terms that have found their way into widespread use through popular media, the language of the underworld remains foreign to many of us.

This glossary consists of terms and abbreviations that came up while conducting the interviews for this book. It is not an all-inclusive list, but an aid for a non-specialist reader of this text. It includes terms and abbreviations used by law enforcement and scholars to describe different phenomena and organizations, plus a compilation of slang terms used by drug users, gang members, and others to describe different acts, objects, and organizations that are often associated with criminal activity or presence.

Finally, there is a list of street gangs and a list of prison gangs mentioned in this text. This is not meant to be an exclusive list.

Terms which are *italicized* have a Spanish etymology. Terms typically spoken with their article are presented with the article appended.

### *ABBREVIATIONS*

AA	<i>Artistas Asesinos</i>
AB	Aryan Brotherhood
ADA	assistant district attorney
ASU	Arizona State University
ATEP	Alien Transfer Exit Program
BA	<i>Barrio Azteca</i>
BD	Black Disciples
CA	court administrator
CASS	Central Arizona Shelter Services
CAT	United Nations Convention Against Torture
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CCC	Chicago Crime Commission
CHA	Chicago Housing Authority
CI	confidential informant
CIBS	Center for Inter-American Border Studies

CIMT	crime involving moral turpitude
CO	corrections officer
COV	change of venue
CPD	Chicago Police Department
CPS	Chicago Public Schools (Chicago only); Child Protective Services (nationally).
CTA	Chicago Transit Authority
CVL	Conservative Vice Lords
DA	district attorney
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency
DFS	<i>Dirección Federal de Seguridad</i>
DHE	Domestic Highway Enforcement Strategy
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DO	detention officer
DoJ	Department of Justice
DTO	drug trafficking organization
DUI	Driving while intoxicated
EAD	Employment Authorization Document
EDC	Eloy Detention Center
EPPD	El Paso Police Department
ESRC	The Economic and Social Research Council
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
GANG Program	Gang Renouncement and Disassociation Program
GD	Gangster Disciples; 'Growth and Development'
GED	Graduate Equivalency Diploma
GREAT Program	Gang Resistance Education and Training Program
HIDTA	High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area
HIKE	Home Invasion and Kidnapping Enforcement
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IHP	Institutional Hearing Program
IPRA	Independent Police Review Authority
LPR	legal permanent resident
MIRP	Mexico Interior Repatriation Program

MROP	Misdemeanor Repeat Offender Program
NTA	notice to appear
OASISS	Operation Against Smugglers Initiative on Safety and Security
OPS	Office of Professional Standards (Chicago; replaced by the Independent Police Review Authority)
OTM	Other than Mexican
PAN	<i>Partido Acción Nacional</i>
PC	Protective Custody
PD	prosecutorial discretion
PIO	public information officer
PO	parole officer
PRD	<i>Partido de la Revolución Democrática</i>
PRI	<i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</i>
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RICO	Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act
SAFEPF	Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facility
SHU	Special/Security Housing Unit
SMI	severely mentally ill
SO	Sexual Offence/Offender
SSP	<i>Secretaría de Seguridad Pública</i>
STG	Security Threat Group
TCO	transnational criminal organization
TDC	Texas Department of Corrections
TDCJ	Texas Department of Criminal Justice
TRS	Temporary Relief Status
TS	Texas Syndicate
TVL	Travelling Vice Lords
UA	Urinalysis
UACJ	<i>Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez</i>
UDA	undocumented alien
USBP	United States Border Patrol
USCIS	U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services
UTEP	University of Texas, El Paso

VD	voluntary departure
WBP	Wetback Power

## TERMS

5; “the Five”	Represents the five-pointed star of the People.
6; “the Six”	Represents the six-pointed star of the Folks.
13; XIII; X3	Represents the letter <i>m</i> , typically indicating an allegiance to the Mexican Mafia (California).
14; XIV; X4	Represents the letter <i>n</i> typically indicating an allegiance to the <i>Nuestra Familia</i> .
acid	see: LSD.
Ad. Seg.	Administrative Segregation; commonly known as solitary confinement; 23 hours in lockdown/ 7 days a week.
AZ-13	
<i>bajadores</i>	See: rip crew.
bang	To represent an allegiance to a particular gang; the act of fighting; be a member of a gang.
beef	A conflict.
big homie	A patched in member of the M; the shot caller on a prison yard; a high-ranking member of a street gang.
bird	A kilogram.
blood in, blood out	A policy in which a potential gang member needs to spill blood in order to join, either by being jumped in or by assaulting or killing a target and in which a gang member either needs to be jumped out or to die in order to leave the gang.
blow	Powder cocaine.
body carriers	Individuals who transport drugs strapped to their bodies or hidden in a body orifice.
bridge	A person, typically female, who is used as an information conduit between two members of the same gang while those individuals are in prison.
brown/ brown sugar	Brown powder heroin; black tar heroin turned into a salt to make it snortable.
bud	Marijuana.



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burner	An item such as a phone or a gun that is used for a given purpose or a short period of time and disposed of afterwards.
<i>burrero</i>	A drug mule. Can refer to a person who is carrying a large pack of marijuana on his or her back.
<i>Califas</i>	A Californian gang member; California.
<i>carnal</i>	A soldier in a Hispanic gang.
cartel	The layman term for both DTO and TCO.
China White	Powdered heroin, white in colour; $\alpha$ -Methylfentanyl.
<i>chiva</i>	Heroin.
<i>cholo(a)</i>	May refer to a Latino street gang member or, more generally, a Hispanic urban style.
chomo	A child molester.
Chuco; Chucotown	El Paso, Texas.
<i>Chueco</i>	Crooked; corrupt.
<i>Clicka</i>	A clique or a set of a street gang.
cliqued up	Associated with.
connect	(v.) to buy something illegal; (n.) a supplier.
crib	A place of residence.
crystal; crystal meth	Methamphetamine.
CSI	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (along with several spinoffs) is an American crime drama television series that airs on the American commercial broadcast television network CBS.
<i>cuete</i>	A gun.
<i>cuota</i>	A tax levied on illicit business or activities.
<i>cura</i>	A dose of heroin, literally a cure for dope sickness.
cut	(v.) to adulterate; (n.) an adulterant; (n.) an escape route or a short cut.
dime / dime bag	A \$10 quantity of a drug.
doing your full number	Serving an entire sentence.
dope	Heroin.
dro	See: hydro.
dub	A \$20 quantity of a drug.

eight ball	1/8 <sup>th</sup> of an ounce; 3.5 grams.
eighty	See: eight ball
<i>equis</i>	See: X.
<i>esquina</i>	A person who is a prospect for a prison gang; to have someone's back.
family; <i>fama</i>	A prison gang that has a recognized organized status within the prison system.
<i>feria</i>	Money; earnings
<i>filero</i>	A shank.
<i>Finiquera</i>	A slang Spanish term for Phoenix.
flip, to	To represent a gang; to change allegiances.
<i>fumero</i>	A drug smoker, usually either methamphetamines or heroin.
g; glass	The form of methamphetamine most recently in demand as of 2014. It is clear in appearance and crystalline in form.
gang patch	A tattoo that indicates full membership to a gang.
gangbang	See: bang.
ghost	A person who does not involve himself with gang politics in prison.
green light	To put a contract out to murder a person.
<i>halcón</i>	A lookout.
half	A half of an ounce.
hawala	Also known as <i>hundi</i> , hawala is an international money transfer system that transfers funds without international money movement. It is accomplished through a network of brokers.
HB 1070	House Bill 1070, known as <i>The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act</i> . It was passed in Arizona in 2010.
heat	The police; police pursuit; police attention.
hole, the	See: ad. seg.
homie	A friend; a fellow gang member.
hot	Stolen; of police attention.

<i>hoyo</i>	See: ad. seg.
human smuggling	The illicit movement of people who are willing participants to that movement.
human trafficking	The illicit movement of people who are unwilling participants to that movement with the objective of conscripting that individual to work, such as forced labour or prostitution.
hydro	Hydroponically grown marijuana.
jab	Twelve or thirteen dime bags of a hard drug, such as heroin or crack.
jacket	The actions associated with a criminal as viewed by other criminals. It may be positive, meaning that the person has put in work and gained status, or negative, because the person is an informant or because the person has done so much that he is under constant scrutiny from law enforcement.
<i>jaina</i>	A female; chick.
joint, the	Prison.
jumped in (to get)	To be initiated into a gang via a beating for a predetermined length of time.
jumping off the porch	Getting involved with gang life as a child.
<i>jura</i>	Police; DOs; COs; law enforcement, generally.
key	A kilogram.
kite	A note that is sent out on a string to another prison cell; a note sent to the DOs or COs to request something such as medical care or to report an incident.
KJ	'Krystal Joint;' PCP; differentiated from sherm by being considered of higher potency or quality.
L, the	The elevated train in Chicago.
leaf	See: PCP.
lerper	A methamphetamine addict who steals to support his or her habit.

literature	The history of a gang; required knowledge for gang membership.
LSD	Lysergic acid diethylamide.
main line	General population.
MAT WIT	Material witness/ material witness protection.
mob	A street gang.
<i>mordida</i>	A bribe.
neutron	An inmate who is unaffiliated with a street gang upon arrival to county jail or prison.
nickel / nickel bag	A \$5 quantity of a drug.
OG	An “original gangster;” typically an older gang member who has enough respect that he is not required to do menial tasks for the gang anymore.
<i>paisa</i>	A foreign Hispanic, typically a Mexican national.
paisa weight	Any weight which is a bit less than the norm. For example, an eight ball may only weigh 3.2 grams instead of 3.5.
patched-up	A fully recognized gang member who has his gang patch.
PCP	Phencyclidine.
PC-up, to	To go into protective custody.
pee-wee	A young person who may either be a prospect or a recent recruit of a gang.
Phoenician	A person who is from (or lives in) Phoenix.
<i>pinta, la</i>	Prison.
plug	A wholesaler of illegal drugs; a supplier.
<i>pollerismo</i>	Human smuggling.
post up	To loiter at a space, often to assert control over it.
powder	Powder cocaine or heroin.
primo	Marijuana laced with crack.
prison gang	A gang that, at least originally, requires its members to have served in prison and to have put in work in order to gain status. Not to be confused with street gangs (whose members can also be in prison, but not

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	necessarily affiliated with a prison gang.) Formally known as security threat groups.
prospect	A person who is going through the process of becoming a full-fledged member of a prison gang.
<i>puente</i>	See: bridge.
punk	A weakling; a homosexual.
<i>punto</i>	Another term for <i>halcón</i> used in Nogales, Sonora.
put on blast, to	To disclose sensitive information to another person or to make such information public knowledge; to declare that a certain group or person should be assaulted at any and every opportunity.
qp	A quarter of a pound of marijuana.
quarter	A quarter of an ounce.
<i>querida</i>	A female associate of a Hispanic prison gang member. She may serve as the member's voice on the street or conduct business, such as cashing money orders, putting funds on the inmate's prison books, or facilitating communication, on the inmate's behalf. Also, see: bridge.
<i>ratero</i>	A burglar.
<i>raza</i>	People; the gang; Mexican nationals.
red light	A non-aggression pact between two gangs.
reggie	Regular or low grade marijuana.
<i>remate</i>	A coup de grâce.
renegade	A Chicago-area gang that refuses to align itself with the People or the Folk.
rip crew	A group that conducts a robbery of narco-related booty, such as the product or money being transported or held. They often burglarize suspected stash houses but can also assault transporters while <i>en route</i> .
rocking	Throwing rocks at a law enforcement officer.
sawbucks	A \$10 quantity of marijuana.

Section 8	Section 8 of the Housing Act of 1937. It refers to programs that assist low income households to pay rent in the United States.
seg	See: Ad. Seg.
serve	To give somebody drugs in a drug transaction.
set	A faction of a gang usually identified by a geographical marker such as an intersection or neighbourhood name.
shag	A hair cut in which the wearer sports a buzz cut on most of his head and long hair, similar to a mullet, at the nape of the neck.
shake up, to	To shake hands with a fellow gang-member using the gang's handshake.
shard	See: g.
sherm	A More menthol cigarette dipped in phencyclidine (PCP); PCP.
shorty	See: pee-wee.
shot caller	In prison, an inmate who controls the yard. In a neighbourhood, the person who controls the crime in the neighbourhood.
slam	To inject drugs.
smack	Heroin.
<i>soltero</i>	See: ghost.
SOS	Smash on sight – to assault a person who pertains to a certain group irrespective of the consequences when he is within striking distance; shoot on sight.
speed	An early form of methamphetamine, typically with impurities and murky in colour.
spice	Synthetic marijuana; an herbal mixture treated with chemicals in order to induce a high that is supposedly similar to marijuana.
steamer	A stolen car.
<i>stilo</i>	How one carries oneself; the dress code of a gang.
strap	A gun.

<i>Tango</i>	A loosely knit prison gang organization, whose members are united by geographic origin, and that does not require commitment outside of the prison.
tax	To charge a person in order to do a particular, typically illegal, action
<i>tecato</i>	A heroin addict. The name is derived from the bottom of a crushed Tecate beer can, common in México, which can be used as a cooker for black-tar heroin preparation.
teener	1/16 <sup>th</sup> of an ounce; 1.8 grams.
<i>tema</i>	A prospect for the Mexican Mafia.
trap	A hang out spot; a drug house.
tweaker / tweaker	A crystal meth addict.
<i>vato</i>	A male; dude.
<i>veterano</i>	An older gang member who may or may not have aged out of criminal activity but still associates with the gang. Sometimes used to indicate an OG and sometimes used to indicate a person who is older than an OG.
<i>vida loca, la</i>	The gang life; often symbolized with three dots placed in a triangle, (::).
violate, to	To violate one's parole or probation. This typically results in being incarcerated for a period of time which may be up to the original sentence.
violated, to be	To be jumped in or out; to be beaten for a set period of time.
violation	A beating of a gang member or a prospect by his fellow gang members.
water	See: PCP.
wax	A potent distillation of marijuana.
weed	Marijuana.
whiteshirt	Depending on context, a civilian worker or a guard.

- wila* A private note sent between members of the same gang in which at least one of the parties is incarcerated.
- X An ex-member of a street or prison gang who has either left without any blessing or who has been expelled and subsequently green lit.



## *PRISON GANGS AND GROUPINGS*

Aryan Brotherhood	A white-only prison gang, founded in San Quentin State Prison in the 1960s, that generally adheres to racist ideology. Today, it has chapters throughout the country.
<i>Califas</i>	A gang or gang member from California; California.
Chuco Tango	The El Paso branch of the Tangos.
<i>Eme, La</i>	Often stylized 'eMe,' a nickname for the Mexican Mafia.
Mau Maus	An African American prison gang found in the Arizona prison system.
Mexican Mafia	It can refer to one of three organizations: The Mexican Mafia, the original Southern California-based prison gang founded in 1957 in Deuel Vocational Institution; Mexicanemi, also known as the Texas Mexican Mafia; or, the Arizona Mexican Mafia. The Arizona Mexican Mafia is split into two groups, the <i>Old Eme</i> and the <i>New Eme</i> . Other branches have been identified, though none is considered to be as prevalent as these three.
<i>Nortehños</i>	Street gang members from Northern California (north of, but not necessarily including, Bakersfield).
<i>Nuestra Familia</i>	The Northern Californian Hispanic prison gang.
Peckerwoods	White prisoners who are controlled by Arian Brotherhood but not necessarily members of AB.
Sur 13	Southern United Raza; see: Sureños.
<i>Sureños</i>	Any gang member from Southern California (South of Bakersfield). Can also refer to the prison gang these members populate upon entry to prison.
Warrior Society	A Native American prison gang found in the Arizona prison system.
Woodpile	See: Peckerwoods.

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