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Third Generation Gang Studies: An Introduction

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by

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Abstract

This paper reviews the literature and research related to third generation street gangs. Widely known as third generation gangs (3 GEN Gangs), these complex gangs operate with broad reach—often across borders—and have mercenary and at times political and potentially terrorist objectives. These are frequently identified as transnational gangs, known as Maras, and occupy the 3 GEN niche. The typology of the three generations of gang evolution, based on the interaction of three factors: politicization, internationalization, and sophistication found in the literature is also described. Finally, future research and security concerns are identified.

Gangs occupy one corner of the intersection between crime and war. Traditionally viewed as criminal enterprises of varying degrees of sophistication and reach, some gangs have evolved or morphed into potentially more dangerous actors. In many of the world's cities, and especially in 'criminal enclaves' or 'lawless zones' where civil governance, traditional security structures, and community of social bonds have eroded, gangs thrive.

This paper documents the evolution the gangs that occupy this operational space, recounting the recognition of third generation street gangs, typically described simply as third generation gangs (3 GEN Gangs), and the development of the body of literature describing these entities.

Unstable Foundations

The reach and penetration of gangs into US communities was graphically depicted in the series of maps assembled by eminent gang researcher Malcolm W. Klein in *The American Street Gang* (1995). Building from that graphic view, the foundation for articulating the potential and subsequent evolution of third generation gangs is found in the recognition that virulent street gangs were the source of significant instability in some communities, cities, and urban regions. In some cases the level of violence became so substantial that its effects mirrored conflict in what are usually described as 'war zones.'

In the paper "The Disaster Within Us: Urban Conflict and Street Gang Violence in Los Angeles" (Sullivan and Silverstein, 1995) ten years of street gang violence in Los Angeles is examined. This paper demonstrated that street gang activity is a chronic form of conflict disaster; it also documented the influence of drug trafficking and increased access to weapons in the shift of some gangs from a turf orientation (the first generation) to drug or market-based entities (the second generation). This paper also shows the potential for epidemic levels of violence in a community. From that starting point, questions about the ability of gangs to further metastasize and form the vanguard for paramilitary groups were raised in Robert J. Bunker's "Street Gangs—Future Paramilitary Groups?" (1996). Concerns over LA based street gangs possessing nonhierarchical decision-making structures, terrorism based on social (rather than political) considerations, and military perceptions of an evolving "new warrior class" derived from non-state combatants were highlighted in that essay.

Defining Third Generation Street Gangs (3 GEN Gangs)

The potential for chronic gang violence to evolve was satisfied—at least for some gangs—with the potential reach offered by new technologies (such as the Internet and mobile digital communication). These technologies allowed the gangs to move beyond their traditional turf and later drugs-market orientations to engage in more sophisticated activities. Some gangs appeared ready to move into a third generation. Examples of gangs moving into the third generation described by Sullivan included the Chicago-based "El-Rukn" gang, San Diego's "*Calle Trienta*," and Cape area gangs or vigilantes in South Africa including "Hard Livings" and "Pagad." For example, five members of the EL Rukn's were convicted for conspiring to conduct terrorist activity as a mercenary proxy for Libya; *Calle Trienta* was used as a proxy by the Arellano-Felix cartel and was involved in the 1993 assassination of Cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo in Guadalajura. In South Africa both Hard Livings and Pagad (an Islamist vigilante group), respectively radicalized by civil war and jihadists, engaged in bombings and assassinations, as well as conventional political activity. Subsequently, endemic high-intensity gang violence in Brazil demonstrates third generation potential in many of Brazil's cities, including Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

In a series of papers by Sullivan starting with the article "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels, and Netwarriors" (*Crime & Justice International*, 1997), the three generation street gang typology was described and defined. The details of the first article were expanded and refined in an expanded paper, "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels, and Net Warriors" (*Transnational Organized Crime*, 1997), and "Urban Gangs Evolving as Criminal Netwar Actors" *(Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2000).

Sullivan's examination of urban street gangs in those papers revealed that some gangs evolved through three generations—transitioning from traditional turf gangs, to market-oriented drug gangs, to a third generation that mixes political and mercenary elements. He identified three factors: politicization, internationalization, and sophistication that determined the evolutionary potential of these criminal actors. When describing the 'third generation' gang, Sullivan found that 3 GEN Gangs possessed many of the organizational and operational attributes found with net-based triads, cartels and terrorist entities. The three generations of gangs can be described as follows:

> ***First Generation Gangs*** are traditional street gangs with a turf orientation. Operating at the lower end of extreme societal violence, they have loose leadership and focus their attention on turf protection and gang loyalty within their immediate environs (often a few blocks or a neighborhood). When they engage in criminal enterprise, it is largely opportunistic and local in scope. These turf gangs are limited in political scope and sophistication.
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> ***Second Generation Gangs*** are engaged in business. They are entrepreneurial and drug-centered. They protect their markets and use violence to control their competition. They have a broader, market-focused, sometimes overtly political agenda and operate in a broader spatial or geographic area. Their operations sometimes involve multi-state and even international areas. Their tendency for centralized leadership and sophisticated operations for market protection places them in the center of the range of politicization, internationalization and sophistication.
>
> ***Third Generation Gangs*** have evolved political aims. These are the most complex gangs and they operate—or aspire to operate—at the global end of the spectrum, using their sophistication to garner power, aid financial acquisition and engage in mercenary-type activities. To date, most 3 GEN Gangs have been primarily mercenary in orientation; in some cases, however, they have sought to further their own political and social objectives.

The characteristics differentiating the three generations of street gangs are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Street Gang Generations

limited	***Politicization***	*evolved*
local	***Internationalization***	*global*
1st Generation	2nd Generation	3rd generation
turf gang	drug gang	mercenary gang
turf protection	market protection	power/ financial acquisition
proto-netwarrior	emerging netwarrior	netwarrior
less sophisticated	***Sophisitication***	*more sophisticated*

While analyzing these generations, it became apparent that the evolution was paralleling the development of 'netwar' actors as described by RAND analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt in their many works of netwar and information-age conflict. As a result, the three gang generations are also described in light of their ability to engage in netwar. Thus a first-generation gangster is a proto-netwarrior, a second-generation gangster is an emerging netwarrior, and a third-generation gangster is a fully realized netwarrior. The culmination of this analysis and articulation is found in "Gangs, Hooligans, and Anarchists—The Vanguard of Netwar in the Streets," published as a chapter in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt's essential volume *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy in the Streets* (RAND, 2001).

Networked Conflict and Crime: 3 GEN Gangs, War, and Insurgency

In "Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords" (Small Wars and Insurgencies, 2003) Sullivan and Bunker observed that the nature of crime and conflict has changed and continues to evolve. Building from foundations found in Martin van Creveld's Transformation of War, Arquilla and Ronfeldt's works on Netwar, and the emerging Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) school exemplified by Lind, Wilson, Hammes et al, we observed that war

is and will be increasingly influenced by irregular combatants—non-state soldiers. These actors would utilize technology and networked doctrine to spread their influence across traditional geographic boundaries. This, we believed, would result in a shift in political and social organization, fueled by rapid developments of technology and the exploitation of network organizational forms. The result blurs the distinctions between crime, terrorism and warfare benefiting a range of non-state actors: drugs cartels, street gangs, terrorists, and warlords. This paper examined the journey of street gangs, one type of transnational criminal organization—the drug cartel—and warlords through this evolution.

Not long after, these analyses and emerging third generation street gang theory started to resonate. First, William S. Lind (a major theorist of third and fourth generation warfare theory) observed in an opinion piece, "4GW: On The Homefront," that 4GW was not solely the province of Iraq and Afghanistan but could also be seen in gangs such as El Salvador's *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13). Shortly thereafter third generation gangs are discussed and become widely know due to their pivotal treatment in Max G. Manwaring's monograph *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency* (2005).

Manwaring, a scholar at the US Army War College, identifies the salient characteristics of contemporary gangs and describes their potential linkages to insurgency. Specifically, Manwaring describes the role of all three gang generations in the context of insurgency and the conflict environment, describing the impact of criminal gangs on state stability. This argument is continued in his opinion/editorial piece "Gangs, 'Coup D' Street,' and the New War in Central America," where he further examines gangs as non-state actors posing substantial security threats in Central and Latin America.

John Robb links 3 GEN Gangs to 'Global Guerillas' in his important Blog of the same name. In a 2005 segment entitled "Transnational Gangs," he comments on Manwaring's observations on Central American gangs like MS-13 and the challenge they pose to states. Robb also goes on to explore gangs as insurgents noting that coercion, regime change fuelled by delegitimatization and ultimately state failure are important variables and potential consequences of unfettered gang activity. Lind again comments on this nexus in his 2005 opinion piece "MS-13 vs. Minutemen?" where he focuses on the conflict on US borders and the role and nature of the intrastate security threat they pose.

The human and spatial terrain of gangs and their counterparts in examined in "Terrorism, Crime, and Private Armies" (Sullivan 2005). In this paper organized crime and gangs are examined in light of their potential to foment 'criminal free-states.' Criminal free-states are the ultimate expression of failed states and their local analog 'failed communities.' The trends and potentials accompanying gangs, warlords, pirates, insurgents, and private armies operating in this operational space of 'lawless zones' are described.

Thomas C. Bruneau, a scholar at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterrey, CA, assesses the impact of *maras* (gangs or *pandillas*) in his 2005 paper "The Maras and National Security in Central America." Specifically he looks at 18th Street (*Mara 18* or M-18) and MS-13, including their roles as, and links with, transnational criminal organizations, and provides the examples of these gangs using their own websites to secure their goals.

Similar concerns are also surfacing in policy discussions, as evidenced by Ana Arana's essay "How the Street Gangs took Central America" (*Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005). Arana, a journalist, recounts the migration of the initially Los Angeles based 18th Street and MS-13 gangs to Central America and back to the US, as well as to new outposts in Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere. This migration was partially fuelled by the deportation of individual gang members from the US to El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. These *maras* are currently significant cross-border or transnational actors often serving as foot soldiers for transnational organized crime, and engaging in cross-border crimes, including human trafficking, arms and drugs smuggling and other activities for their own ends. The existence of complex, third generation gangs operating in a transnational operational space makes gang evolution a national or global security issue, not solely a matter for criminologists and community police.

The potential for violence and instability as a result of cross-border gangs adopting their own mores is seen in the case of MS-13. For example, MS-13 members and leaders participating in the trafficking of migrants have also been linked to death cults and ritualistic activity. A detailed examination of this potential is found in a study by Kevin Freese for the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, KS (Freese, 2005). Freese specifically refers to Mexican media reports (Garcia Davish, 2005) to illustrate this link to the *Santa Muerte* cult among MS-13 members in Mexico.

The Iraqi Insurgency, much like urban streets and Central and Latin America, provides a laboratory for testing the validity of the third generation gang model. The contribution of third generation gang studies to the circumstances faced in the broader crucible of the Iraqi Insurgency is examined in Nicholas I. Haussler's Master's Thesis for the Naval Postgraduate School. In this study, Haussler draws insights from third generation gang theory to illustrate the dynamics of insurgent networks in Iraq. In "Third Generation Gangs Revisited: The Iraqi Insurgency" (2005) he examines 3 GEN theory for its utility, concludes it describes many of the dynamics found in the Iraqi Insurgency, and adapts the schema to provide an integrated model suited to the Iraqi context of state-insurgent interaction.

Conclusion and Future Research

Third generation gangs have been studied for a decade. During that period, a growing number of papers have recognized the potential for

these entities, documented and anticipated their evolution, and tracked their progress and proliferation. These papers have shown the progress of some gangs in their mutation from turf to market to mercenary/political actors. Fortunately, only a few have made the trek. Most gangs remain firmly embedded in the first and, to a lesser degree, the second generation. All gangs challenge civil stability and, at each progressive generation, the depth of the threats posed increases.

Gangs are non-state actors that at times can, with the right catalysts (like interaction with cartels and other sophisticated entities) become non-state criminal soldiers. As such, they challenge state institutions to foment instability and conflict. Gangs will no doubt continue to pose these challenges in areas where state institutions are weak, where the gap between those that have and those that have not stimulate crime and instability, and in those areas where insurgency seeks to reign. As they do so, the role of third generation gangs will continue to be studied.

As mentioned in the introduction, street gangs exist in one corner of the intersection (or gray area) between crime and war. Since 9/11, this gray area has become the dominant operational environment of concern for both US law enforcement and military groups. The major opposing force (OPFOR) that exists in this environment is composed of the "criminal-" or "non-state soldier". Numerous manifestations of this OPFOR have developed globally: terrorists, guerillas, insurgents, cartel enforcers, pirates, and outlaw mercenaries provide but a few examples. Third generation street gangs can now be added to this growing list with the emergence and morphing of entities such as MS-13, M-18 and other transnational *maras* or complex megagangs. While gangs do not yet represent a fundamental threat to US security, as Bunker in 1996 postulated would eventually take place, they currently do present such a threat to the Latin American countries of Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala (Kraul *et al.,* 2005). Further, potential international linkages between *Jihadi* groups, such as al-Qaeda, and street gangs are now being actively monitored by both US and European government agencies, as is the likelihood of prison recruitment of street gang members by *Jihadi* groups.

Given the numerous manifestations of the criminal-soldier, third generation gang studies have both drawn upon, and influenced, other disciplines, studies, and research. To date, the most influential bodies of research drawn upon for 3 GEN studies have been:

Netwar (conflict between social networks)
Emerging Forms of Warfare (Non-trinitarian War, 4GW, 4th Epoch War)
Transnational/Global Crime Studies.

In turn, third generation gang studies are influencing research into:

Insurgency Evolution (Iraq)

Drug Cartel Evolution (South America and Mexico)
State Stability (Central America)
Jihadi Group and Street Gang Linkages (United States and Europe)
Non-State Threat Emergence (theoretical).

In the future, it may be expected that further cross-disciplinary influence, research, and studies will take place. As a case in point, in his paper "Child Soldiers: Warriors of Despair," Sullivan reviews and comments on P.W. Singer's book *Children at War* (Sullivan, 2005). After reviewing the work, he has come to the perception that in many ways, some street gang members are in actuality child soldiers. Given that reality, the potential for a deadly convergence between third generation gangs with child soldiers in war torn countries must now be further examined. Further research in these areas is necessary to ensure an understanding of gang evolution and aid efforts to counter the nexus between complex crime and global insurgency where gangs and global guerillas challenge states and stability.

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