Article

"Bangin" at the Crossroads': A Study of Rural Gangs

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Abstract

Previous research on rural gangs in America has found these groups not only to be relatively transitory in nature but also forming during periods of economic recovery. This qualitative study focuses on a community within the impoverished rural Mississippi Delta with an extended history of institutionalized Black gangs with ties to national gang nations. Through in-depth interviews with incarcerated members of the community, many of whom have/had gang ties, we seek to understand the unique conditions that fostered these non-traditional rural gangs. More specifically, we critically examine the relationship between social and structural factors that affected the origins, processes, and persistence of gangs in the area. Our findings highlight the social dislocations influenced by state-abandoned responsibilities and the corresponding adaptations by gangs and their members.

Keywords

gangs, rural crime, communities and crime, qualitative research in crime and deviance

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By the 1990s, research showed gangs in all 50 states and across suburban, small-town, and rural settings (Howell, 2012; Starbuck et al., 2001). However, rural gangs have received scant research attention compared to urban gangs (Anderson et al., 2016; Matz & Mowatt, 2014; Wells & Weisheit, 2001; Wilson, 2008) based not necessarily on their own characteristics but their perception as being less pressing than urban gang matters (Dukes & Stein, 2003). With the established presence of gangs in rural America, answers to questions concerning their origins, processes, and life course remain unresolved.

First, debate remains as to the origins of rural gangs. One consideration is the degree to which rural gangs are "home grown" and how similar that growth is to urban gangs. Urban gang literature posits gang emergence through structural control theories focusing on weakened community social controls leading to gang formation and structural adaptation theories focusing on gangs as responses to negative environmental conditions (Decker et al., 2012). Another position shifts from "home growth" and suggests that rural gangs arise out of diffusion as a result of gang members going or returning to rural areas and recruiting to create satellite groups (Howell & Egley, 2005; Maxson, 1998; Weisheit & Wells, 2001, 2004). While both these arguments contain social and structural mechanisms impacting their form of origin, often missing is the inclusion of large-scale demographic migration patterns.

Second, there seems to be some disagreement concerning assumed homogeneity of rural and urban gangs (Hagedorn, 1988; Weisheit & Wells, 2004). Studies suggest rural gangs are smaller, less established, less criminogenic, and have shorter life spans than their urban counterparts (Howell & Egley, 2005; NGIC, 2012; Weisheit et al., 2006; Wells & Weisheit, 2001). Furthermore, research posits that rural gangs flourish during times of economic prosperity (Weisheit & Wells, 2004) despite rural America generally being in a state of economic decline (Slack et al., 2009). Not as widely discussed, however, is the nuanced way in which rural economic and structural contexts shape gang realities from those who experience it.

Through 30 in-depth interviews with incarcerated members of a rural southern community, many whom have/had gangs ties, we investigate their experiences and perceptions related to the origin, processes, and persistence of gangs in their community. The qualitative nature of our analysis not only allows for the imperative examination of the social and structural conditions in which the gangs operate (Brotherton & Gude, 2020) but also provides a better empirical tool for examining how those conditions might generate adaptations, particularly pertaining to violence in the South (Lee & Ousey, 2011). Furthermore, the Southern regional location provides an opportunity to investigate possible links between rural gangs and the large-scale migration of Blacks from the Southern U.S. The goals of the current research are to

add to the limited empirical research on rural gang characteristics and to highlight the social and economic conditions that provoked the institutionalized gang development in a rural Southern community—providing a foundation for future studies on rural gangs.

Literature Review: How Did Gangs Develop in Rural Areas?

The emergence of urban gangs in non-urban areas has led to the question of why and how they materialized. Potential answers to these questions can be grouped into two non-mutually exclusive broad categories: (1) *diffusion* through migration of urban gang members to more rural areas for either social or instrumental purposes (Hagedorn, 1988; Howell & Egley, 2005; Maxson, 1998) and (2) economic deprivation fostering *home growth* either through lowering social control or gangs emerging as adaptations to these detrimental structural conditions.

Diffusion Via Migration

Early media accounts and scholarly writing attributed the appearance of gangs in rural areas and small towns to the migration of gang members from the city to the country (Weisheit & Wells, 2004). To some extent, this made intuitive sense. Perceptions of urban gang problems as more severe than those in rural areas, coupled with the fact that gangs existed in urban settings years before emerging in rural areas, seem to suggest that rural gang emergence was the result of changing rural demographics. Howell and Egley (2005) suggest that rural areas saw increases in ethnic and racial diversity that could account for some, but not most, of the gang problems observed in rural areas. To the extent that rural gang emergence is a result of migration from the city, scholars offer different processes as to how migration occurs.

One position is that larger urban gangs may engage in "franchising," seeking out additional markets in which to expand illegal enterprises and activities (NGIC, 2012). In particular, the expansion of drug dealing enterprises has been seen as one reason for the spread of gangs across smaller and rural communities (Maxson, 1998). Urban gang representatives would go to non-urban areas to recruit, providing recruits with ideas and symbols and extracting their loyalties to parent organizations. Once parent gang representatives return to the city (or are incarcerated by local authorities), the satellite gangs often dissolve, which partially explains the more transitory nature of most

rural gangs (Howell & Egley, 2005). Still, recognizing that this type of franchising occurs, Weisheit and Wells (2001, 2004) suggest that it accounts for a very limited amount of the diffusion of gangs to rural areas.

Alternatively, some scholars contend that most gang member migration to rural areas is due to social reasons (Egley, 2000; Weisheit & Wells, 2004). Gang members may move to rural areas with their families or to live with relatives. In some cases, members may have even moved to get away from urban gangs, to avoid detection by the police, or simply for a change of pace from larger city living (Weisheit et al., 2006). In fact, the phenomenon of families with children moving to burgeoning rural areas in search of opportunities was posited as a reason for research findings that showed rising rural gang activity during times of economic recovery (Weisheit & Wells, 2004). This unexpected finding contrasts with the plethora of literature on the relationship between economic deprivation and the origins of gangs in urban communities.

Home Growth Through Structural Control and Adaptation

Decker et al. (2012) argue that literature on urban gang formation can be classified into two different perspectives, structural control theories and structural adaptation theories. Both perspectives concentrate on social and economic disadvantage at their core but depart when specifying the central causal mechanisms. Structural control theories posit that gangs organically form in neighborhoods due to weakened social control. Economic deprivation and social disadvantage limit neighborhoods' capacities for social control by undermining the mechanisms that allow residents to come together to address collective problems (Bursik, 1988; Sampson et al., 1997). Normative confusion and social distance, brought on by residential instability and turnover, turn peer groups into gangs. Furthermore, the heightened violence and subsequent fear of victimization experienced in these neighborhoods serve as conduits for perceiving gangs as institutions of kinship and protection (Adamson, 2000).

While structural control theories focus on the inability of communities to inhibit gang formation through social control, the structural adaptation perspective focuses on how gangs emerge in response to negative environmental conditions leading to blocked or uneven opportunity distributions. Gangs become a type of community institution through which members can achieve economic or social status via illegitimate activity or membership. Furthermore, contemporary research highlights the increasing role of violence as a social status indicator (Anderson, 1999; Venkatesh, 2008).

The Stark Reality of Rural America

Whether rural gang activity is diffused or homegrown, the soil still must be fertile for such seeds to grow. As research has illustrated, the image of the idyllic rural life with uniformly strong support systems does not necessarily fit the reality in many rural areas (e.g., see McLaughlin & Jensen, 1995; Swaim, 1995). The stark realities of rural America have been brought about by a myriad of devastating socioeconomic changes.

Agriculture has traditionally been an unprosperous economy in rural America through underemployment and dominating the economies in which it resides (Slack et al., 2009). The harsh and demanding conditions of the agricultural economy to rural Americans intensified when control of the agriculture and resource extraction industry shifted from small locally-owned and often family-oriented businesses to larger corporate entities. This shift, coupled with technological advancements and farming consolidation, resulted in large job loss in rural towns across the U.S. As traditional agriculture jobs began to disappear, they were often replaced by low-wage consumer and industrial jobs as labor-intensive firms moved to rural areas seeking low-wage, non-urbanized work forces (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990).

Now long-established, this economic structure of rural America, comprised of scarce and unstable labor opportunities, has led to higher unemployment levels and reported median family income levels 33% lower than families living in American cities (Kusmin, 2013). Furthermore, all of these deleterious conditions have led people in low-income rural areas to be less educated, less likely to be employed, and more likely to fall under the federal poverty line than those living in higher income rural and urban areas (Glauber & Schaefer, 2017).

Importantly, environmental disparities such as poverty, low educational attainment, unemployment, and other indicators of social disorganization have been found to be incubators for gang formation and perseverance (Hagedorn, 1998). While these economic realities are often associated with urban blight, they have increasingly become a characteristic of rural communities and led the *Wall Street Journal* to claim rural America as America's "New Inner City" (Adamy & Overberg, 2017).

Rural and Urban Gangs Similarities and Differences

If rural gangs are not that disparate from urban gangs in terms of how and why they emerged, it raises the question of whether rural gang processes similarly parallel those of urban gangs. Among the comparatively few studies

of rural gangs that provide some basis for comparisons, findings are mixed as to whether the theories and factors common to the broader gang literature universally apply to rural contexts.

Findings suggest that non-metropolitan gangs have fewer members, are less established, and have shorter existences than their urban counterparts (NGIC, 2012; Wells & Weisheit, 2001). Howell and Egley (2005) explicate these points, suggesting that variability of gang prevalence in rural settings is partly due to smaller populations of youths in rural areas; smaller pools of potential members that become ever smaller as members get arrested or lose interest in the gang.

Other studies suggest that rural and urban gangs are similar in some contexts. Hardman (1969) reports findings from interviews with 21 ex-gang members, all previously affiliated with one of four youth gangs in a midwestern college town with a population near 36,000. Hardman (1969, p. 176) concluded "many more similarities than differences between small town and metropolitan gangs." Among a few observed differences were that non-urban gangs lacked "huge alliances," and did not maintain specific "turfs." Esbensen and Lynskey (2001) compared survey data from Philadelphia youth gang members to members in rural Idaho and Illinois, finding that the rural gangs were highly organized and increasingly involved in criminal activities compared to youths from the city. The authors interpreted their findings to suggest that gang involvement may be just as criminogenic in rural areas as has been observed in urban areas. More recent findings from a 2016 study using AddHealth data similarly showed comparable rates of gang member delinquency across urban, suburban, and rural contexts, even when filtering by offense seriousness (Watkins & Taylor, 2016). This pattern of findings was further supported by Fleming (2018) using secondary data collected across 24 rural or small-town locations in seven states—rural gang processes may be more alike urban gangs' than previously assumed.

Current Study

Current research on rural gangs is limited and primarily based on interviews/surveys with official agency stakeholders (Anderson et al., 2016) or student self-report data (Evans et al., 1999; Watkins & Taylor, 2016). The literature generated from these data provides an important, albeit limited, understanding of the origins and characteristics of rural gangs. Furthermore, very few studies used primarily qualitative methodologies and focused on the relationship between the rural community and gang realities.

Our specific research community was chosen due to a recent spike in gang-related violence as well as the established presence of two Chicago

based gangs: the Vice Lords and the Gangster Disciples. The Vice Lords, a member of the People Gang Nation, started in 1958 in the St. Charles reformatory and has become one of the larger gang organizations in Chicago and beyond (Dawley, 1992). While the Vice Lords still engaged in violence and other criminality, early in their existence they also mobilized civil rights activities and secured government funds to own and operate legitimate businesses to help their communities (Dawley, 1992; Knox & Papachristos, 2002; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). The Gangster Disciples, a Vice Lord rival, are members of the Folk Gang Nation. The Black Gangster Disciples originated in 1969 when David Barksdale and Larry Hoover combined their respective gangs (Knox & Fuller, 1995). Like the Vice Lords, the Gangster Disciples also engaged in social outreach in the 1990s, with the goal to secure grants and become engaged in local politics (Knox et al., 2019).

The current study seeks to further the debate on the connections between urban and rural gangs and examine a rural community in the impoverished Mississippi Delta that has a decades long history with institutionalized gangs. To this end, we investigate the relationship between social and structural factors present or missing in our Rural Mississippi community, how they impacted the origin, processes, and persistence of institutionalized gangs, and how those realities match up with their urban counterparts. More specifically, we examine whether gangs in our community simply diffused from urban areas and if this diffusion occurred during times of economic prosperity and caused primarily by social reasons. In addition, if homegrown we investigate whether the contextual and social factors linked to urban gang formation relating to social control and adaptation impacted the emergence and life-course of gangs in our rural community. To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all participants, while "Delta City" and "Delta County" reference the study locations.

Methodology

Research Design and Analytic Plan

This study uses data from 30 in-depth, in-person interviews with community members incarcerated in the Delta County jail, many of whom have ties to the Gangster Disciples or Vice Lords. These interviews were obtained during a larger, IRB-approved, 4-year ethnographic study (2014–2018) on violent crime in the Delta County community that included special approval to work with vulnerable populations (see Supplemental Appendix for more information).

A primary area of interest was better understanding the relationship between the community and gangs. Life history interviews were utilized and respondents

were asked about their own personal perceptions and experiences as well as their perceived experiences of family, friends, and the community. Semi-structured interview instruments created for the face-to-face interviews were comprised of 41 base questions related to demographics; gang experience; the gangs themselves; social networks/capital; community; and family. The majority of items were open-ended, allowing respondents complete freedom in answering. As interviews progressed, sensitizing concepts and keywords became apparent and allowed researchers to begin defining and categorizing responses into areas to focus further data collection and open up the research to unforeseen directions (Charmaz, 2000). The conversational interviews were audio recorded and averaged 106 minutes, ranging from 34 to 164 minutes.

After interviews were complete, thematic analysis, guided by the constant comparative method, was used to analyze the qualitative data and reveal common thematic narratives from the respondents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Incident by incident coding was initially employed to help researchers preserve participants' special terms and give meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself (Charmaz, 2000). Focused coding was then used to synthesize the data, determine the adequacy of constructed codes, and allow for new threads of analysis to emerge. Last, theoretical coding was used to confirm the thematic categories.

Study Site: Delta City and County

Delta City is located in the Mississippi Delta region of the U.S., one of the most depressed areas of the country, and suffers from entrenched poverty. The research area resembles much of the same characteristics discussed in criminological literature as linked to higher crime rates. Specifically, Delta City and its county are challenged by high levels of poverty, economic decline, unemployment, population outmigration, and poor health and educational attainment.

At the time of the study, Delta City had a population of less than 18,000, and its county population was less than 27,000, both of which are considered "rural" according to the Census Bureau and "micropolitan" per the National Center for Health Statistics. The area witnessed a large outmigration of their population since 2000, losing nearly 20% of its residents between 2000 and 2015. The population was over half female and had a median age of 33.

Our community had an age structure that was relatively young with more than a quarter of residents under the age of 18. Minority concentration was high, with African Americans representing more than 75% of the population. Approximately one third of households were single-parent female-headed households, and about one quarter of residents over the age of 25 did not have a high school or equivalent degree.

Similar to much of the Delta region, the study site experienced high levels of poverty and rates of deindustrialization. Delta City had more than 40% of the population below the poverty line, which, for the same time period, was nearly twice that of the entire state of Mississippi (22%) and nearly three times that of the U.S. (15%). Many stable jobs that provided livable incomes left the area, leaving behind limited employment opportunities, often in low-paying service occupations. Less than 0.5% of county residents had occupations in management, business, science, or the arts and only slightly over 50% were in the labor force at all.

Study Sample

The final sample is comprised of 30 individuals incarcerated in the Delta County jail. The sampling frame consisted of individuals from the Delta County community whom were identified by local authorities as having known gang affiliations. The sample was 93% male with only two 2 female participants. The average age of participants was 26 and the sample was predominantly minority with 27 African American, 1 Hispanic, and 2 White respondents.

While all respondents were thought to have known gang affiliations during initial selection, gang membership was determined through self-disclosure. Seventeen respondents disclosed current gang membership, five others stated prior gang membership, and the remaining eight claimed no gang affiliation. All 30 respondents had friends or family members involved in gangs and all claimed knowledge of gangs in the community. Because our research focused on the both the perceptions of those in a gang as well as the relationship between community and gangs, we retained all 30 respondents, regardless of demographics or self-disclosed gang affiliation, which allowed a more holistic view of the realities of our study setting (Table 1).

Limitations

A main study limitation is its restriction to only one rural southern location. While the Delta site was chosen due to its unique history and current gang presence, the origins, processes, and persistence of rural gangs in the South are going to differ from other locations like the Midwest or West Coast, for example. Second, while the life history interviews with our 30 respondents provide rich qualitative data, generalizability is always a concern with smaller sample sizes and responses that rely on participant recollection. While the current study's accounts give strong indicators of historical changes in Delta City and County, the authors caution against making sweeping generalizations about

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

	Count	Percent ($n = 30$)	Years *(Mean)*
Sex			
Male	28	93.33	
Female	2	0.67	
Race and ethnicity			
Black	27	90.00	
White	2	6.70	
Hispanic	1	3.30	
Age			
Mean			25.97
Minimum			18
Maximum			50
Education			
Some middle school	2	6.70	
Some high school	11	36.70	
High school/GED	10	33.30	
Some college	5	16.70	
College degree	2	6.70	
Gang status			
Active	17		24.59
Left gang	5		31.60
No history	8		25.63
Affiliation			
Gangster disciple	12		
Vice lord	6		
Simon city royal	1		
Other	1		
Did not specify	2		

protracted gang changes in the Delta region or beyond based on limited respondent narratives. It is nevertheless informative to share our respondents' unique voices and experiences, as their positionality and geographic location are crucial in understanding the nuances of gang subcultures in the U.S.

Results

Origins of Gangs in Delta City

Diffusion due to historical state and community violence. Black youth gangs first began to attract attention in Delta City in the 1970s. Many early gangs were

described to be small disorganized friendship groups primarily involved in low-level delinquency. These origins were detailed by Michael, who learned this history upon joining the Vice Lords at age 12. His decision to join was heavily influenced by his family's long history of gang involvement, which also shaped his nostalgic view of gangs.

> *It was street gangs then, you feel me? Vice Lords was a street gang called Saint Lovers . . . and the Gangsters was called Hell Cats, they was a group from out of Laketown, and all of them converted, you feel me? The Older Cats, they came a part of these gangs and that's what sort of made it the same way cause they was beefin' in the 70's and 80's. . .They still had they little rivalry gangs. . . but it was just nothin' serious. . .a little fist fight here and there.*

While gangs were not new to Delta City, specific Chicago gangs became known after being introduced to the area by migrating Chicago gang members. This migration was not tied to franchising attempts but resulted primarily from social reasons, specifically family migration motivated in part by state and community violence against Blacks in the South.

The context of these family migrations is tied to the Great Migration of African Americans in the U.S., fleeing terroristic violence, harsh Jim Crow legislation, and segregation experienced in the rural South to urban areas in the North between 1916 and 1970. Blacks fleeing the Mississippi Delta region often ended up in Chicago because of access to the Illinois Central Railroad that provided direct transport from many Delta cities to Chicago (Grossman, 2011). As Midwestern cities began to face economic decline in the 1970s, this migration reversed itself with many returning in search of better opportunities. Many of our respondents were from families that participated in both migrations. In fact, moving back to be closer to family and employment were the most common reasons stated for families returning.

This history was explained by Corey, a 32-year-old who joined a gang at 24, even after earning his master's degree. Here, he explains both Delta City's and its residents' past and current connection to Chicago and how this connection influences gang members in the area.

> *They try to do things like the guys did in Chicago. And the reason why? Because most people in this area migrate back and forth between Chicago, you know? And this all for, man, you know the movement of the slaves? Back when, you know, blacks started to leave the south, move up more north, northward along the Mississippi River. Ok, so they trying to do things like you know people of Chicago and adopt a lot of their strategies or whatever.*

Corey went on to state that the gangs in Delta City originated due to members "trying to stand up in the community, because a lot of injustice that was

going on. Blacks were being mistreated." These origins linked to state abandonment and oppression further tie Delta City gangs to their Chicago counterparts. In the following quote, Michael expands upon structural injustices leading to migration patterns.

> *My grandfather, he was here as a child. They left cause of the racism, discrimination. Back in his time, back in the 40's, they left and went up north. . . they went to Chicago and my father. . .he was affiliated in Chicago and he brought what he knew from Chicago down here and he established the <gang> here. . .basically all of* [Delta City] *are all Chicago gangs.*

Those who returned to Delta City with known gang affiliations from Chicago seemed to have substantially greater impact on area gangs and were an important conduit for gang ideology and culture. A few respondents reported that the Conservative Vice Lords were first established in Delta City in the mid-1980s when an affiliated teenager came down from Chicago for family reasons. The Gangster Disciples had emerged a little earlier when one member was visiting Delta County for a family funeral and started recruiting and converting members from the area's current gangs. While the connection between Chicago and Delta City remains strong, it appears that the current primary source of sustainability for Delta County gangs may be through home growth, as only 1 out of our 30 respondents was born outside of Delta County.

Formation of National Institutionalized Gangs in Delta City

Adaptation to social and structural deficits. Similar to research on the Vice Lords and Gangster Disciples in Chicago (Knox et al., 2019; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000), the early adaptations of organized gangs in Delta City were commonly described by our respondents as being more community-oriented and providing civic and social services not available in their communities. Clarence, our oldest respondent, had a long and prestigious family history with gangs. While he expressed remorse for his gang activity, he also had pride for his mobility in the gang and his extensive institutional knowledge. Here, he describes why he joined in the 1980s:

> *When I was joining a gang, it was like an organization, you know what I'm saying? About helping others, about community, help with community and what not? So, when I got involved, it was helping people out. . . It was a good movement. Then later on it just changed and changed, a whole different generation came. They really wasn't about that no more.*

While the Delta City gangs never applied for federal funding or started legitimate community organizations, they did provide smaller

community-level services. This is akin to past research that points to gangs prior to the 1970s organizing grass roots activities such as educational workshops and recreational programs (Suttles, 1968). In the following quote, Robert, 27 years old, explains how he saw gangs' priorities change when asked in what ways they were supposed to help the community:

> *Help make the community strong. Help all the brothers be as one. . .being on call, going in the house, somebody needs a job, trash pickup, they need help. Helping the community, but it ain't like that <now>. They ain't helping no one, they are afraid to be helping out. They just take it out of the street, to people working hard for their money. Making a lot of older people not want to come out, get on their porch like they used to back in the early 90's.*

Sam, a 26-year-old who joined a gang when he was 13, describes how this community angle was a result of Black communities' mistreatment:

> *See, back then, they were cleanin' up. When I was in, they was cleanin' up the area where they stayed at. Helpin' old people out and stuff like that. . .it was built for fighting against the government cause we wasn't getting' treated fairly. That what it was for.*

These positive community interactions led to views of gang members as positive members in the local community and neighborhoods, similar to their Chicago counterparts (Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000); however, these perceptions eventually soured—a change seen as negative by respondents. For example, Tyler, the 22-year-old son of a prominent former gang leader, expressed his dismay to this change and how it impacted his own self-perception:

> *I believe the community looks at us like gang banger. . .a bad group. . .I feel like we got bad communication with the community. . .we used to wash people's cars, do a lot of stuff. . .it just changed, all of a sudden. Everything just fell off. . .It makes me feel like I'm a hoodlum but I don't suppose to look that way. . .it ain't supposed to be gang banging. Basically the community looking at us that way cause nobody is doing community development.*

This negative sense of self seems to be driven by two factors. Partially, it is driven by the realization of the negative perception of gangs in the community as well as the agreement that gangs have changed from semi-positive community organizations to predatory. It is also driven by frustrations that the gang similarly failed to provide its members what the community could not: positive social status. In addtion to these evolving perceptions, Delta City gangs were becoming more institutionalized due to their isolated and sparse rural communities.

Structure and environment strengthening ties to place. Like Harding's (2009) work on adolescents in Boston, we find a link between violence, neighborhood identity, and community membership. In Delta City, the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords became tied to specific neighborhoods with identifiable geographic boundaries. The isolated rural environment with small population and neighborhood size, along with one's own neighborhood residence, played large roles in both perceptions of safety as well as perceptions of gang involvement. Both local authorities and the community assumed that most young males were affiliated with their neighborhood gang. Robert, a 28-year-old who has left gang life, explains how the pre-determined assumptions limit spatial mobility:

> *Say I'm from the Stonecreek, if I get caught in Lakeview, I'd have to fight. Because they pretty much assume just what I am. You know Vice Lord or Gangster.*

While gang affiliation was not universal to residents in specific neighborhoods, the confluence of geographic boundaries and sizes of neighborhoods increased perceptions of gang affiliation. It also further perpetuated retaliation, as explained by James, a 30-year-old white male who associated with Gangster Disciples but never affiliated due to his race.

> *You'll hear about somebody getting shot up over in Lakeview or Stonecreek just because something happen 2, 3 years ago. It's always retaliation. Know what I'm saying? Between Vice Lords and Gangsters, it's always that. I'm talking 'bout always. It'll never end.*

Similar to Harding's (2009) findings, these ties to place often deterred respondents from navigating out of their small neighborhoods, in part due to fear of victimization or wrongful accusation. Further exacerbating such fears is the perception that information circulates rapidly in a small, rural town and is never forgotten. In the following, Jackson highlights the paradoxical lack of privacy but also isolation generated through the interchange of rural location and size.

> *Well, this city is really messed up because it's a small city. . .everybody knows everybody. Everytime a shooting goin on, nobody get's away. . .you're past gonna follow you down here. .all that trouble gonna keep up with you. Unless you leave, that's the only way.*

Community size and isolation also factored into retaliation across generations, sometimes only by relation. In the following quote, Corey explains a

time where his brother was assaulted due to perceived wrongs done by distant relatives.

> *They came at my brother, because we were relatives, though they had nothing to do with me and my brother. It has something to do with family members, 5, 10 years earlier.*

In the end, small neighborhood sizes and lack of residential mobility fostered a form of retaliatory violence that spanned generations. Furthermore, the lack of economic and social mobility lead to fatalistic attitudes by those in the community; that regardless of allegiance they would be assumed to be allied with their neighborhood gang and experience the effects thereof.

Persistence Due to Structural and Social Conditions

Sustained home growth as adaptation to historic negative economic conditions. The primary driving force in the persistence of gangs in Delta County seems to be due to a myriad of negative economic changes in the region. From 1970 to 2019, the average median household income for Delta City, when adjusted for inflation, dropped $8,405 to around $30,233 per year. Furthermore, 40% of the population of Delta City lives in poverty. Coupled with declining economic conditions, Delta City experienced large instances of white middle class flight, further concentrating poverty and race in the city. African Americans made up slightly over half of the population in 1970 but represented 82% of the population in 2019.

These decades of economic downturn were heavily influenced by both the loss of the large-scale agricultural industry and the coinciding deindustrialization. In the following quote, Robert explains how the larger well-paying employers disappeared in Delta City only to be replaced by employers with smaller labor needs.

> *Back then, they had a wealth of opportunities. Factories here, everybody get a job. Because this factory holds about 200 to 300 people that work in this factory, 300 in this factory, and so on. Now, they took most of the factories out. There isn't anything but farming, farm workers, little businesses going on, Walmart or Kroger, places like that. They ain't going hire no 300 people, that's too many employees. They ain't making that much money, to pay them all. . . The only way, you get a job is if this person quit or this person gets fired.*

The scarce jobs that remained often did not provide living wages. Marissa, a 19-year-old Hispanic female who stated she wished she was born and raised

somewhere else, discussed the lack of mobility provided by the current employers in Delta City.

> *I've worked at a lot of fast-food restaurants around here. And, they not too fond of moving you up further than $7.25. So, the one or two biggest jobs here to get, is the factory and Walmart. Cuz' Walmart moved up to $9.00. And you know, it will help me a little bit, but it's still not enough money to some people.*

As jobs became scarcer, some individuals turned to illegitimate means to earn money, as Travis, who used to fold clothes at a local casino for slightly above minimum wage, explains:

> *It's hard to get jobs around here. So, they turn to streets, you know what I am saying? They see the dope boys riding the big cars and all that good stuff so that's what they look up to.*

It was during this economic downturn when Delta City witnessed local gangs that engaged in some pro-social neighborhood services transitioning to focus exclusively on instrumental crimes, primarily drug dealing. Derrick, a 21-year-old whose mother and father were members of rival gangs, describes the transition:

> *I'm saying, we* [gangs in Delta City] *were created for common and better purpose. We supposed to better our community, you know what I'm saying? Help each other type stuff. But like I said, drugs, money, all that made it impossible, everybody wanted to be at the top.*

Current adaptation due to illegitimate opportunity deficits. The current perception of our respondents was that gangs provided more avenues to opportunity through status mobility tied to violence rather than instrumental illicit activity. Due to perceived changes in the illegitimate market, gangs shifted to more nebulous and chaotic cliques predominantly focused on violence, a trend seen in other research (Starbuck et al., 2001). Marissa, whose high school class had many arrested for violent crimes, describes this process:

> *I really think they are crappy, because like in comparison, you know gangs in junior high when I was there, it was the Gangsters and the Vice Lords. To distinguish, you wear red and black and then blue and black, wear the little colors or whatever. Now, these little kids made their own little cliques and debating on who has the most power, starting you know fist fights, gun fights, selling drugs. Like we didn't do all that, of course you know every now and then might be a gang fight. But you know, gang fight using fist, fist only.*

Marissa continued that she felt that much of this violent crime was "done for show" and "basically to get a name around here." That is not to imply that contemporary gangs in our sample were fully transitioned and solely interested in violence. They still participated in other illicit activities; however, drug dealing was increasingly seen as widely dispersed in the communities and no longer solely tied to gangs and their members. Furthermore, the lack of money in the community inhibited gangs and their members from large drug dealing profits. These conditions contributed to a higher focus on violence as well as younger generations of gang members having more vicious personas according to our respondents.

> Tyler: *Everybody want to be a killer. . .like they can't be touched. The big bad wolf you know? Really ain't nobody even trying to get money now. Like everybody just want to be tough.*

It was a clear theme that, as Corey put it, "violence was running the show" and the younger generations were rougher. Furthermore, neighborhoods and other geographical locations had become intrinsically tied to gangs and gang violence.

It became clear in the data that the economic deprivation of the area had direct impact on gang involvement. The continuously deteriorating economic conditions of the area led to both the proliferation and longevity of gangs in the community. This was coupled with most respondents' perceptions of high gang participation among local youth, sometimes as high as 90%. Gang membership was often seen as a possible means of economic mobility that is not available through traditional and legitimate occupations. As avenues for success through even illegitimate means grew bleaker, status mobility through violence became the current adaptation.

Conclusion

Research on urban gangs is well established in the criminological cannon but considerably less attention is paid to gangs and their members in rural locales. Furthermore, the limited literature is inconclusive on issues of gang origin, inconsistent on gang processes, and contrary to urban literature in relation to economic deprivation. Compared to urban gangs, rural gangs are found to be smaller, less established, ephemeral, non-territorial, and form during times of economic prosperity not deprivation. Similar to urban gangs, however, are rural gangs' level of violence and organization. These gaps and discrepancies led to questions of the appropriateness of urban gang models being used for rural gangs (Weisheit & Wells, 2001).

We utilized in-depth interviews with incarcerated members of a rural southern community, many of whom have/had gang ties to investigate their perceptions of the origination and persistence of gangs in their community. Unlike research from other rural sites, our studied community had a long history of institutionalized Black gangs with ties to gang nations from Chicago. Respondents' life histories illustrate a history of gangs that is intrinsically linked to economic and social fluctuations. The origins of gangs in Delta City were not due to a process of simple diffusion, rather were linked to the Great Migration of Blacks from the state sponsored oppressive and violent Jim Crow regime. Furthermore, we find that gang formation was an adaptive response to social and structural deficits that led to early gangs providing positive social outreach in their communities. With that said, these adaptations were not simply answers to environmental disadvantages but also heavily impacted by persistent economic disadvantage leading to weakened social control *within* the gang to resist the transition to more criminal- and violence-based groups. This transition was not taken lightly by members and respondents often internalized negative community perceptions.

The rural gangs in our research community were not small and transitory in nature but had been entrenched in the communities for decades with multigenerational memberships. The initial emergence of the Vice Lords and Gangster Disciples to the area is more tied to diffusion due to large scale population migration in the United States and less to the deliberate actions by gangs themselves. Additionally, this large-scale migration did not happen in a social and structural vacuum but was brought upon by centuries of state-based violence and racial caste systems in slavery and Jim Crow legislation and only possible due to the 13th Amendment. The Great Migration of Blacks to urban centers in the North and the subsequent back migration to the rural South provided a correlated, yet spurious vessel for both gang formation and transformation. Furthermore, due to the continued connection with Chicago established during the Great Migration, these rural gangs were not poorly established or disorganized but were well organized factions of the large Black gangs found in Midwest urban areas.

Just as structural and social issues cannot be separated from our rural gang origins they also cannot be separated from their impacts on gang processes. Due to a real or perceived lack of social resources available to their community, early gangs in our research site routinely participated in positive social outreach. While much of this outreach was informal and small in scale it still led to a relatively positive community perception (or at least not completely negative) of gangs and their members within the Black community. Members seemed to take pride in providing for their communities what the local government could or would not. In part, this led to reducing victimization of

community members not affiliated with gangs. In time, gangs switched to become more involved in illicit activities as they adapted to changing environmental constraints. As the legitimate economy became sparser gangs moved more toward drug dealing. Recently, as the drug market became less rewarding, they switched to violence to gain social status. This is not unlike the evolutionary histories and economic shifts similarly impacted Chicago gang processes. Similar to the gangs of Delta City, Chicago communities were negatively impacted by deindustrialization yet just before and after World War II, Chicago gangs resembled more stable, community-integrated, grassroots-type groups, organizing educational workshops and recreational programs (Suttles, 1968; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). Also like the Delta City gangs, Chicago gangs eventually shifted away from this role and turned more to criminal and violent activity. Venkatesh and Levitt (2000) argue this shift was at least in part due to due to economic downturns as well as systematic shifts like mass incarceration that forced members to move away from pro-social community activities.

These Chicago and Delta City gang parallels illustrate that the adaptions to environmental disadvantages are multi-faceted processes impacting both individual and group-based processes. On one hand, the inability of residents to achieve both economic and social mobility via legitimate means allowed for gangs to fill the void. On the other hand, the same stagnant and entrenched poverty reduced the informal social control of gangs to resist this transition. Thus, we found our respondents to long for the past when gangs engaged in some positive social behavior and had a more nuanced reputation with the public.

The negative sense of self reported by our respondents, due to evolving negative community perceptions of gangs, may provide an avenue to policy. Brotherton and Gude (2021) found that gang policies based on social inclusion rather than repression and exclusion more effectively lowered gang violence in Ecuador. Like previous gang members in Ecuador, our respondents' identities were not fully rooted in criminal activity. This was made clear in respondents' negative sense of self being tied to negative public reputation and want for a return to the pro-social activities of the past. The current study community, like others with similar gangs tied to previous positive community activity, may benefit from replacing repressive tactics that view gang members monolithically as criminals with more inclusive methods that aim to incorporate and legitimate these groups. Through genuine policies recognizing these groups as cultural street organizations, coupled with holistic policies of job creation and educational outreach, it might reintroduce outlets for positive status attainment through gangs that are no longer reliant on violence and illicit activity.

The physical and structural environment also impacted gang processes in our rural community. The small community size and isolated environment had similar negative impacts to perceptions of agency, safety, and gang membership found in research of larger urban neighborhoods (Harding, 2009). Institutionalized gangs becoming tied to specific neighborhoods limited mobility due to fear of victimization or arrest stemming from the (sometimes incorrect) "gang member" label. Furthermore, the small population size and residential stability exacerbated concerns of retaliatory gang violence by making it multi-generational.

The perceived increased odds of retaliatory violence in our community, due to its size and isolation, may be ripe for the incorporation of the cure violence model. This method seeks to stop gun violence through the same methods as infectious diseases and has been proved successful in such urban areas as Chicago, Baltimore, New York, and Phoenix (Butts et al., 2015; Slutkin et al., 2014). It focuses on preventing retaliatory violence through the use of community members as violence interrupters to discourage retaliation by friends or family members of the victims. Furthermore, outreach workers, also members of the community, identify those at highest risk and work to decrease their likelihood of violence. Unique characteristics of rural communities might benefit from this program for many reasons including their size increasing social ties and capital between residents from which to incorporate not only current but multigenerational connections.

Economic deprivation played a critical role in the persistence of gangs in our research community. The early transition of small local youth gangs to institutionalized gangs was largely due to a back migration of Blacks leaving a declining Chicago economy. As families moved back to rural Mississippi seeking jobs they brought children and grandchildren with them who had become affiliated with Chicago gangs. Unfortunately, the economy they were turning to was also in the beginnings of a state of long-term decline. While rural gangs in previous research are reported to be small, transitory, and disorganized, the decades of negative economic conditions in Delta County and City allowed for the sustainability and ultimate transition of smaller disorganized groups to the larger, more organized, and institutionalized gangs of today.

The basis for traditional rural gangs to be smaller and disorganized may be reliant on the resurgent economies from which they often arise (Weisheit & Wells, 2004). For example, these relatively unstable small groups formed in times of economic resurgence might, in turn, be fortunate enough *not* to have the contextual environment leading to their sustainability. When members become arrested or leave, other members may have the privilege to transition out of the gang and pursue legitimate opportunities. On the other hand, rural gangs that experience the same stagnant and concentrated economic

disadvantage shown to foster large social dislocations and increased crime may instead suffer the same fate as seen in urban gang literature. Over time, these groups will become further entrenched and organized, larger in numbers, and more violent as they share the same path as their urban counterparts.

While the social fabric of rural and urban communities are inarguably different, pivotal economic and social systems may likely have similar if not indistinguishable impacts. The origins of gangs were not due to simple diffusion or home growth but rather a combination of various socio-historical events spanning multiple communities and states. Furthermore, the economic deprivation that was crucial for gang formation and persistence worked through mechanisms encouraging adaptation *and* limited social control within the gangs. Last, the evolution of gangs in our community were also impacted by changing economic and social structures and their relationships mirrored many of urban gangs in the Midwest.

While our intent was not to make generalizable statements to rural or urban gangs, our findings at least hint at the possibility that similarities related to impact of environment on gang origin, process, and persistence exist across rural and urban gangs. If the dislocation of rural America has been occurring since before the 1950s, then gangs should be more pervasive and not as transitory or ephemeral as some rural gang literature suggests. Furthermore, if the effects of structural disadvantage are truly invariant across areas, as is posited by much of macro-ecological models of crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2005; Sampson et al., 2018), then one would expect more homogeneity, not less between rural and urban gangs.

Future research should continue to unearth the unique and not so unique characteristics of rural gangs. The result would not only be pure in nature but could also prove instrumental in providing a foundation for what evidence-based practices honed in urban gang policies might also be advantageous in rural areas. Last, while the conceptualization of rurality often denotes homogeneity, there is large differentiation among different rural locales. Future research on rural gangs must account for local nuances and look beyond the simplistic classification of rural/non-urban, taking into consideration the specific structural and contextual environments.

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