

Gang Violence Worldwide

CONTEXT, CULTURE, AND COUNTRY

Gang violence is now a global problem. Once limited to a small number of cities in the United States, gangs can now be found on six continents. The spread of gangs is especially troubling because of the concomitant increase in violence and crime. Gangs reflect the culture and context of the country in which they are active, with important differences across countries and regions of the world.

Levels of violence are contingent upon the propensity of gangs to use firearms.

This chapter focuses specifically on gang violence worldwide and pays particular attention to the role that guns play in the perpetration of violence by gangs and gang members. The chapter offers several conclusions:

- Gang membership is a key risk factor for violence and victimization.
- Gang violence is typically directed against other gang members.
- Gang homicide rates greatly exceed those for the general population.
- The availability of firearms in a country has a strong effect on the access of gangs to guns, and the use of guns by gang members.
- Despite the differences in gang activity across regions, the motives for gang violence are more alike than they are different.

Historically, gangs were seen as a problem concentrated in the inner core of US cities. This view is now outdated and at odds with the facts. Spread in large part by patterns of cultural diffusion, the style of US gangs has been adapted to the cultural and societal circumstances of five different continents. Gangs are now found in Africa, North, South, and Central America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. While the best documentation of gang presence and activities still occurs in the United States, evidence of the global presence of gangs is quite strong.



Members of various churches and social organizations take part in a torch rally in San Bartolo to call for peace and an end to violence. El Salvador, September 2006. © Yuri Cortez/AFP

There are both direct and indirect consequences of gang activity. The direct consequences are seen most visibly in the extremely high rates of violence in and between gangs. Gang homicide rates in the United States are often more than one hundred times higher than rates for the general population. The widespread availability of firearms in the United States is related to this extremely high level of violence. In the European context, where firearms are less available to youths and offenders, rates of lethal violence (though not other forms of assault) are considerably lower. In countries that have experienced political turmoil, large-scale drug markets, and civil strife, gang violence is quite high. The lack of a stable economy and political structure, coupled with the availability of high-power firearms, fuels levels of gang violence that approximate or exceed those in the United States. These conditions are seen most clearly in Central America and several African states.

Across the continents, gangs display a number of common features. The strongest of these are the social processes through which gang violence occurs. These are often characterized by retaliation, with gang violence spreading in a contagious or epidemic fashion. Gang members unite and identify new targets through a collective process, perpetuating cycles of violence until formal or informal intervention takes place. Whether gang members use firearms, knives, or bats, the process has a strong similarity across cultures, countries, and contexts.

Gang violence often appears episodic, with peaks and troughs.

A key to understanding gang violence is the realization that it does not occur in a vacuum. In addition to responding to daily triggers with violence, gang members also react to broader structural factors linked to their neighbourhood, city, and country. The role of social exclusion, in particular, has a significant impact on the formation of youth culture, which is linked to the presence of gangs in many countries. Indeed, poverty, community disorganization, immigration, and other factors play central 'background' roles in gang formation. A prerequisite of understanding gang violence is appreciating the role of such structural factors.

It is also imperative that a fuller understanding of the context of gangs outside the United States be developed. Much of our understanding of gangs in the global context is rudimentary. This chapter provides but a glimpse into gang violence in a global context. While much remains to be learned, there is a strong foundation on which to build future knowledge. 📖