

Black Chicago Gang Members: Perceptions of Gang Violence and Activism

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ABSTRACT

Stuart Hall's (1968) Cultural Studies Theory is a powerful way to understand the ideology of cultural groups. When cultures evolve, so must research, which explains cultural phenomena, reactions, and the perceived impact on the culture's present and future. What typically gets lost in society and research is socially stigmatized subcultures. Gangs are only known for their negative components, ignoring their humanity. Gangs are only in the news for crime, and their crimes in the black community are being used to combat the efforts of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Combating this monotonous image of gangs and applying Hall's theory to gangs becomes no easy task as credible research on gangs is from the 1970s-1990s. This leaves modern researchers in need of information to reflect the ideology, image, and perceptions of gangs of today. This research sheds light on gang members' views on police brutality and black activism. The study breathes new light into the field of studying gangs.

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"This life comes with death in a can, I don't know why it excites people." This is a quote from 20-year-old Chicagoan Shaquan Thomas, better known by his rap name Young Pappy. Thomas was just as infamous in Chicago for his participation in gang violence as he was for his glorification of it in his music. In one of his most popular songs, "2cups," off his mixtape with the same title, Young Pappy raps "Just let my brother know I remember that day of December two. They took my big brother 2." This song was dedicated to Thomas's best friend, Mensa Kifle who was murdered on December 2, 2013. After a reported five attempts on his life, Thomas himself was killed on May, 29 2015, just days before he was to be the opening act for fellow Chicagoan and rap superstar Twista. To most this is a tragic turn of events, but for many Chicagoans it is not. After doing interviews with Chicago residents that are part of gangs, I found out that lives like Thomas are very common where individuals with so much potential can be swallowed up by the many issues of Chicago violence, whether that be other gangs, or justified or unjust practices of the law enforcement system.

This study examined one of the most talked about cities in the country and the biggest issues coming out of the city with firsthand accounts from gang members themselves. As many participants in this study said, this study is needed and long overdue. Many participants expressed to me that the things being reported in the media about Chicago are simply not true and that they are extremely skeptical of the reports of the violence involving gangs, even making statement that suggest that law enforcement are secretly behind a lot of the murders in Chicago to boost funding for the city and the police department. Along with the firsthand accounts of the issues of Chicago, participants also give their views on the Black Lives Matters (BLM) moment. Participants discussed whether the activist group is making a difference in the black community, if they agree with the principles of the groups, and their own personal view/and or involvement in the group's goals.

This research paper is extremely important in multiple areas of research—research involving gang members and their views when it pertains to other social issues, researching how activist groups communicate with the primary group they are advocating for, the different in ways the media cover issues involving groups versus the way the group themselves see the issues, and various future research involving how subgroups' principles and values are depicted in the media versus how the group themselves see and practice themselves.

Review of Literature

To truly grasp the perceptions of the black gang members, it is essential to look at not only the very limited literature regarding information about their origins but the many incidents that have been in the media. According to Stuart Hall's (year) Cultural Studies Theory, these incidents in the media play a vital role in the shaping of many African-American views of both themselves and how others see their role in society. This is even more important for black gangs, as their links to crime has allowed unfiltered media judgment upon them. This means that when gangs are reported in the media, biases that are based upon race and socioeconomic status can be used without fear of backlash of general public. Knowing this, Hall's theory will not only be looked at when it comes to evaluating how black gangs are shaped by way of the media but also when it comes to evaluating the way they see things as well.

Academic Studies of Chicago Gangs

Some of the earliest research done on Chicago street gangs came from Frederic Thrasher's (1927) research, entitled "The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago." In this research, Thrasher described a gang as "life, which is often rough and untamed, yet rich in elemental social processes so significant to the student of society and human nature" (p. 4). Thrasher covered a wide array of topics ranging from "what is ganging" to the racial element of gangs in relation to Chicago gangs and their culture. Although Thrasher's core principles are still relevant today, there have been changes to them to gain the ability to look at modern gangs. At the time of Thrasher's book there were approximately 25,000 gang members of various races in Chicago compared to approximately 100,000 in 2015, even though the overall Chicago population was roughly 2.7 million for each time period. With four of the five biggest gangs being black, we see that "gangbanging" (provide definition here) has gained a facelift. Over the years, many scholars have chosen to stay clear of changes in gang culture. This makes nailing down consistent data challenging.

While looking for data we can see that some scholars have chosen to modernize Thrasher's book and use his work to influence publications of their own. Sociologist James Short (1963) added more information about the social aspect of gang culture in Chicago, writing, "Gangs, like most other social groups, originate under conditions that are typical for all groups of the same species; they develop indefinite and predictable ways, in accordance with a form or entelechy that is predetermined by characteristic internal process and mechanisms and have in short, a nature and natural history" (p. 4). John Hagedorn's book, *People and Folks* (1998), and his article, "Race Not Space: A Revisionist History of Gangs in Chicago" (2006) arose from this research. Hagedorn's scholarship is the foundation of this research project, and his ideas are influential to other research of the modern day involving gangs. Although Hagedorn's research was conducted in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he stated that Milwaukee's gang culture is influenced by Chicago's. Hagedorn's book detailed aspects of modern gangs' characteristics, habits, behaviors and data. Although you could find this data in other publications, what makes Hagedorn's book unique is that it is mostly comprised of the point of view of the gang members themselves. Hagedorn's article examined the origins of gangs and gives chronological evolution of gangs into what they are today. Hagedorn discussed the 1940's and 1950's as pivotal points in black gang culture. Hagedorn wrote about the segregation of blacks and harassment of whites during these years. He also wrote about how gangs during this time typically fought against white's oppression/harassment and fights among the separate black gangs were typically about sports and nothing too major. Hagedorn said in the 1960's, as industrialization/migration rose, so did the intensity and frequency of gang violence; however, during this time, we will see a connection between black gangs and black activism. This was done when Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Hampton talked to various gang leaders to form a moment that was for the betterment of blacks. However, this connection has been broken with the deaths of these activist leaders in the late 60's and the imprisonment and murders of gang leaders. Today's activist groups, such as Black Lives Matter, which are mostly founded by academics, and gangs do not share the same language nor understanding which leaves a divide within two of Chicago's historical subcultures for blacks. The current study aims to fill a gap in existing research by examining gang members' perceptions of Black Lives Matter (BLM).

Lost in the modern-day image of Chicago black gangs is the fact that many black gangs in Chicago initially started as activist groups. Dawley (1972) said, "The Vice Lords helped to form the vanguards of a coalition that closed \$100 million dollars of construction to negotiate more blacks into trade unions" (p. 193). The activist start of the Black P. Stone and the monumental temporary alliance of The Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples to march with Martin Luther King for social change. This research aims to reveal gangs' perceptions

of social issues and provide common roots for social change with groups such as BLM in the hopes to create a dialogue about gang violence, law enforcement, race, and social movements.

The African-American Community's Relationship with Law Enforcement

Brunson (2007) asked 40 black males how they perceived law enforcement, using a Likert scale survey and interviews. The questions on the survey sought to gain the perception on how African-Americans viewed policing in their neighborhood. The survey showed a true mistrust and dislike of the policing in the participants' neighborhoods. The interviews revealed that "descriptions of black citizens' mistreatment by the police are abundant in some African-American communities. Regardless of their accuracy, the dissemination of these narratives increases the likelihood that neighborhood residents will view local policing strategies as racially biased (2007)". Feagin (1991) also wrote that "examination of racial discrimination highlighted the importance of understanding the impact of accumulated discretionary experience" (p.). This research reflects the dilemma that many African-Americans have with law enforcement. Given the history of law enforcement that came about with groups like the paddy rollers, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, there is a level of mistrust in the African-American community. Knowing of this mistrust between the two groups, many individuals have set out to find a way to bridge this gap. Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins, and Ring (2005) looked at perceptions of law enforcement in communities of color, finding that "direct contact with the police during the past year is not enough to change attitudes, but vicarious experience (i.e., learning that someone else has had a good or bad encounter with the police) does influence attitudes in a predictable manner. Also, residents' initial attitudes about the police play a critical role in shaping their judgments of subsequent direct and indirect experiences as well as their future attitudes" (p. 193). This research shows that there is indeed a way that a positive relationship can start to develop with law enforcement and African-American communities. However, there will take the display of positivity inside the community of color by law enforcement. This research will reveal perceptions of law enforcement by gang members, given law enforcement an angle on reaching African-American groups.

Media, Gangs, and Law Enforcement

Cultural studies theory provides insight on how groups are portrayed in the media. In 2000, Thompson, Young and Burns looked at coverage about the gangs in the media. The study found eight recurrent themes. It was discovered that articles devoted to the coverage of gang crimes were outnumbered by stories dealing with various community responses. Articles reporting the results of scientific research on gangs constituted the smallest category. "The results are discussed in light of their importance in the construction of social problems discourse and the maintenance of symbolic power and social control" (p. 409). Based on this research we can see that the idea painted by the media only looks at one aspect of gang culture, creating a "fear of gangs" (Katz, Webb & Armstrong, 2003, p.). However, it does not give a reasoning or any other aspect of gang culture, leaving a one-sided view. Thompson's study adds validation to studies made by researchers such as Hurley, Jensen, Weaver and Dixon (2015), who studied black crime in television news. Their research found that "an interaction between participant ethnicity and treatment condition revealed that ethnic minority group members who view a majority of Black criminals demonstrated significantly lower police support than other participants" (p. 155). With this research, we can assume that even if a predominantly black protest group assembled in a peaceful way, the groups stand a large chance of being misinterpreted as violent and/or the action of a few will be cast among the whole group. Do the two groups not communicate from fear of damaging their images? Do the mostly academic activist group Black Lives Matter view gangs as inherently based on the "Code of the Street" (Matsude, Melde, Taylor, Freng, & Esbensen, 2013) or unable to contribute to the movement in an effective way? Is the information or language inaccessible for gang members? This is what my research will set out to understand.

Stuart Hall Cultural Studies Theory

According to Hall (1978), "We must depart, at this point, from the immediate logic driving certain sections of a political black youth into the mugging solution. To assess the viability of crime as strategy, we must re-examine the criminalized part of the black labor force in relation to the black working class as a whole, and the relations that govern and determine its position - above all, in terms of its fundamental division in the present stage of the capitalist mode of production, the social of labor and its role in the appropriation and realization of surplus labor. We must include these structural relations in our assessment of the relation of crime to political struggle

in the present conjuncture” (Hall, 1978, p. 355). The above quote is from the author of the Cultural Studies Theory, Stuart Hall. Hall is from Great Britain and a follower of Karl Marx. Hall used aspects of Marxism for the adaptation of his revolutionary theory. Hall’s theory has been well received and articulated in various ways. I find the most accurate definition of Hall’s theory is by Barker (2012), who defined the theory as “an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from different disciplines can be selectively drawn on to examine the relations between culture and power” (p. 7). “Cultural Studies is concerned with all those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct” (Bennett, 1998, p. 28). Harsin and Hayward (2013) detailed the influence of Hall’s research on the growing idea of not judging a particular group based on the imagery displayed in popular media. In my research, the theory will be used to observe and ultimately determine how the groups are looked at, how they believe they are being portrayed in the media, media perceptions of the groups and whether there is a media support for the groups.

Research Questions

A common theme throughout the literature is the lack of research on black gang members and their relationships with law enforcement and their perceptions of relevant social movements. In particular, Black Lives Matter (BLM) is new and has not been subjected to the research analysis that many other activist groups have been. Black activism as a whole, police violence in the inner city, and gang banging (the act of aggression toward another person based on gang ties) have not been researched in depth, as their correlations are relatively new and or taboo in the sense of a research topic. The goal of this research was to obtain any and all information from the participants regarding perceptions on BLM, gang banging history, gang banging violence, and police violence. This is due to the idea that most of Americans’ knowledge and perceptions of gangs come from the media. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are Chicago gang members’ perceptions of gang-related violence in Chicago and its causes?

RQ2: What do Chicago gang members view as the solutions to violence?

Methods

The method that was best suited for gathering this data was qualitative because it allowed me to engage in conversations with individuals in deep and meaningful ways. The interview was essential in this study as it allowed researcher to ask in depth questions regarding gang violence, BLM and police violence. Not only did the interviews allow in depth questions that participants elaborated on, but it also allowed the researcher to maintain a level of structure to the conversation, allowed participants to talk in their own language and reflect on experience that has shaped their views about the issues of Chicago. This allowed this study to gather the experimental research it was seeking to obtain. In addition to the uses of the qualitative method, all participants were interviewed in their hometown of Chicago, IL. The goal of this study was to understand the perception of gang members regarding issues taken place within the sub-group. Chicago was chosen for the study given the history of gang banging the city has and the recent uproar in the media about gang violence in the city (2012).

Participants

Participants were African Americans who have or had an affiliation with a gang in Chicago. Based on factors regarding recruitment of participants, the study consisted of two gang factions. The overwhelming majority belonged to a gang known as the Vice Lords. Both branches, the TVL’s (Traveler Vice Lord) and CVL’s (Conservative Vice Lords) were interviewed. The next group that was part of the study were the New Breeds. The recruiting was done using a personal connection of the researcher who knew the participants. The study was made up of 13 straight black males, ages 18-49, all of whom are or had been affiliated for numbers years ranging from 5 to 15.

Measurements

Standard semi-structured interviews ranged from 10-75 minutes. Many questions centered on the research questions; however, participants were encouraged to tell the researcher anything they were missing

regarding the reasons behind the violence in Chicago. Questions in the interviews left room for elaboration and stories regarding the events that they have witnessed or been a part of. Questions at the start focused on background of the participants. These questions included gang affiliation, reasons for joining the gang, and what are the biggest distinctions between individuals that gang bang and ones that do not. The second row of questions focused on the second research question. These questions covered the gang violence aspect of the study and the police violence of the study. The primary focus was to get the gang members perceptions' regarding activating in the city and steps that would have to be made to fix the system.

Procedure

Creating an informed consent form was the first procedure to my study. The purpose of the informed consent form was to make participants well aware of how the interview would be conducted, as well as the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. Next, I developed a set of question that were central to my research questions. As I developed these questions I left room for my participants to provide me with as much information they could tell me about Chicago and how the gang culture has come to become the way it's being portrayed in the media.

After agreeing to the study by talking to the researcher, the researcher talked to each one of the individuals to see if he could find a common time to conduct these interviews. After coming to an agreement with most participants, the researcher traveled to Chicago to conduct the interviews over one weekend. Interviews last 10-75 minutes, the location of the interviews were chosen by both the researcher and the participants with special exception for participants that were on house arrest. Having both parties agree on the location helped to establish comfort and safety for both parties. Each interview was audio and transcribed in a careful manner to ensure some participants did not incriminate themselves.

When dealing with gangs, a high level of confidentiality has to be maintained. Giving out locations of this population could mean the life of participant or information told during a conversation could possibly be incriminating and lead to some serious jail time. Based on this reasoning not only was location and some words deleted from transcriptions, but each participant was guaranteed anonymity and given a pseudonym, and no characteristics were used. Transcriptions were saved in a password-protected device and were destroyed after the data was analyzed. All of the information above was made known to participants through the informed consent form.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the transcriptions, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I once again listened to the interviews and transcriptions to get a real understanding of the emotions that when into each statement. In order to notice patterns to get the most constants understanding of the gang members, this study employed thematic analysis to recognize common themes among the gang members. Many patterns were revealed using the thematic method, such as all participants have been in jail as some point in time, all but one has been victimized by law enforcement, upbringing was the biggest distinguishing factor activity in gang violence and determined threats perceived in Chicago. During the reading of the transcripts, connection between violence, upbringing, and poverty was noticed as this is an area that has been intensely covered in many studies. Connections to studies like the one above showed the important of coding this study and realizing patterns. This will be very beneficial to future research.

Results

The information that this study provided an in-depth insight into the modern day gang culture. Within these interviews, it is easy to see the picture of the violence, the reason behind it, how gang banging looks in Chicago, the gang members' perceptions of the police/other gang members, how activists are viewed in the culture, how it all started and most importantly it put a face, a person, a soul behind the news coverage that we see on television every day. Within the information that was the gather using the two research questions, three themes were made, and each theme contained information for the research question, and eight subthemes. The purpose of the research question was to find out how gang members perceive violence in Chicago. This could have been either police brutality or gang violence. The patterns that were looked for this in research question were frequency of the type of violence, harassment by police officers, biggest threat police or other gangs, and perceptions of the violence in Chicago. This question also attempted to find out reasons behind the violence and

what factors lead individuals to be more violence in the city of Chicago. The patterns looked for in this section were living situations, family involvement in gangs, history of gang violence in Chicago and lifestyles of gang members. The purpose of research question two was to find ideas on situations from the gang members perspectives. The patterns looked for in this section were the participant's views on the BLM groups, thoughts on them being the situation, what the participants wanted individuals that don't understand the gang culture to know about them and overall ideas on situation to the violence.

Table 1: How do black gang members view violence in Chicago?

Violence in Chicago

Subtheme 1: "You got lil homies that killed their lil homies because they killed their big homies. It's not going to stop" (Frequency of violence in Chicago)

Subtheme 2: "Men are not threats. There are obstacles" (Biggest threat in Chicago)

Subtheme 3: "It ain't fun. When it time to blow them guns and look over your head. That's when niggas get scared" (Perception of violence in Chicago)

How did it get like this?

Subtheme 1: "I had to keep it in the bloodline" (Upbringing)

Subtheme 2: "You can't even walk down the street with your kids, because motherfuckers are shooting kids" (Chicago Mentality)

Subtheme 3: "It's a different in being a gang banger and a gang member" (Gang members' mentality)

What can be done to fix this?

Subtheme 1: "Police are a gang. Just with a badge" (Create trust in the system)

Subtheme 2: "I can't really say I rock with them. I like the concept of it" (Ideas on activist groups)

Research Question 1: Gang Members' Perceptions and Messages about Violence in Chicago

The violence in Chicago that affects gang members was reported by most of the 13 gang members who were interviewed. Violence ranged from rival gangs, gang members within their own ranks, and the police. Participants typically talked about a system of respect, revenge and unjust targeting as the results of the violence that take place in Chicago. Below are just some of the many instances of gang members' experiences with violence.

Frequency of violence in Chicago: "You got lil homies that killed their lil homies because they killed their big homies. It's not going to stop." A majority of participants reported being involved in some type of violence. Below are the accounts of all three sections of the frequent types of violence in Chicago that the participants stated, including intra-gang violence, inter-gang violence and police violence. Woo, a gang member for 15 years, gives his account of his run in with police brutality.

It's like what can you do when a person doesn't give a fuck about you has that level of power. It's another time when I was walking in the street and the police tried to hit me. I looked at them and scolded them. They look back and said, "Fuck you looking at, nigga?" I say, "You!! Fuck you talking about." They get out and put me in the back of the car. It's three of them and I am in the back with two of them. They start to ride in the back of alleys looking for drugs to put on me. Couldn't find none and got mad. Pulled me out in the alley and one hit me in the dick with his radio. Then he told me I am a monkey and I belong in the cage. Then they throw my house keys on the expressway. Right on [location of expressway]. I was just 15. If I didn't have the level of intelligence that I had and I was one of these shorties full of rage, I would have tried to kill one of them. That

my maturation into adulthood. That's when I found out how to think more than to just react. That would make a person grow up to hate the police.

The next account of violence that take place in the gang vs. gang is told by Pretty Ricky, a retired gang member, who talks about when he was shot by a rival gang.

Yeah, I got shot up in '89. I was in the wrong spot at the wrong time. I was out south, on [location]. And the gangster stones (The black P. Stones) came up to me after I got out of the store. And, they shot me up....4 or 5 times. I was on the ground laying for dead.

Finally, we have Ricky's account of violations that the gang hands out within its own ranks to maintain order. This story is about how the gang handles snitches. "With the violations. No kicking out. You just get beat up. I got violated one time. I got a couple of them when I was getting beat up. I was going to come back and kill the person that hit me first."

Although there were many accounts of the victimization that had occurred to the participants there we also instants in which they were the perpetrators. Below is the account of one of the participant's past life as a "shooter" for his gang and how he became involved with it.

It was a person that walked up to me and told me, "I can take care of you, your mamma, and your family." I started hanging out with him and he started paying me money. My mamma didn't know it that I started hanging with the wrong crowd. She took me to a meeting when I was 12 years old. Next thing you know it, he told me to shoot somebody, he passed me the gun. I started gang banging.

Finally, we have an account by SG, a gang member for 11 years, about when he felt disrespected by the police and took matters into his own hands.

Look, man. What made me dislike them, bro, is when they cuffed my little sister and she was only 10, bro. For no apparent reason. It got me to fight them. I literally punched one of them, bro. I was telling them she was only 10 and they yelled at me and said I don't give a fuck. After he said that I busted on his ass. After I hit one, we got to brawling. Me and my twin fighting a whole squad of these motherfuckers. It ain't what they do it's how they do it. They ain't doing things correctly, bro. That's why I dislike them. They say serve and protect but they ain't doing that for nobody. All they doing is serving them bullets toward us.

The statements that were made in this section both show that violence is part of growing up and that finding a solution to the ongoing violence can be next to impossible. This section really brings the phrase "If all you have is a hammer, every problems has to be a nail".

Biggest threats of violence: "Men are not threats. There are obstacles." During the interviews, participants typically focused on who were their biggest threats in Chicago and this were either law enforcement or other gang members themselves. Time in jail, occupation and family history typically determined the group they felt was the biggest threat. For instance, participants that had an extended stay in prison with a drug charge were more likely to feel that law enforcement were threats versus participants who had not had extended stay or a drug charge on their record. First we will look at S.G. S.G., who has been shot twice and served a two-year jail sentence, stated,

They be, like, on some for real stuff. They say it's serve and protect but they don't do that bro. Only thing they do is try to take people away. You see they already killing blacks, woadie [term that means brother or friend]. They killing black people for no apparent reason, and they all shorties. You know they trained to neutralize people, bro, and they trained to stop people from doing violence stuff but they ain't doing that. They ain't protecting nothing and they take us brothers, woadie. It can be a Caucasian with a gun and they ain't gone do that [referring to shootings of black versus whites]. But let one of us black brothers have one, they gon' feel threaten and get on only things to try and kill them.

Tune, a long time gang member said,

I think the police are the biggest threat. Because these niggas on the street just like us. On the police side you can't do what you'll do to a nigga to the police. You shoot them they on your ass, you whoop one they on your ass. You do that to a gang member they not going to really do nothing.

This is in contrast to Q.Q., a gang member since 2007, who has had only a few run in with the law. Q.Q. stated this when he was asked who was the biggest threat to him in Chicago.

Each other. If everybody doing good, only a little dirt. The police won't fuck with us. They won't even have that much hostility. I can see how the police become assholes. I see them talk to a black person they feel they have freedom of speech and they talk how they want to talk to you. You can't lock me up. I feel if we don't fuck with the police they don't fuck with us. I am worried about the next black man walking up. I don't what he on. I might be a stain to him or a lick. He trying to poke a motherfucker. Anything.

In this section we see how many individuals in gang member's life have different influences on the ways they perceive threats. Gang members' comments are strongly influenced by what type of gang members answered the question. The ones that have more of a drug dealing background fear the cops more. The ones that are gang members but don't necessarily gang bang, worry more about other gang members seeing them as a stain or a retaliation piece.

Perceptions of violence: "It ain't fun. When it time to blow them guns and look over your head. That's when niggas get scared." In this section, participants stated their overall view on the violence in Chicago. This view is something that is typically left out of the media as many stories typically depict Chicago gang members as bloodthirsty savages. Theo, a retired three-star general of the Vice Lords, stated his feelings on the gang violence:

Man, it's fucked up. You got kids now in days starting this at 6-7 years old. You know what's fucking things up now in days? These damn phones. Technology! You get a phone and give it to a 2-year-old and bet they can work it better than you. Be honest. From where they took it with these kids from when I came up. I am 42. When my mom called me. You know what I had to say? "Yes mammy", daddy called me, "Yes sir." You call a kid now it, "What?" If that was my parents, they would say, "You say what to me, motherfuckers? I'll beat your motherfucking ass." Shit is different now.

Similarly, Woo stated,

Niggas don't really know what they doing out here. It's not even about gang banging. It depends on where you from. You got niggas from different nations. Sworn enemies, clicking up because they from the same block. It's just the younger generations. I'm 25 and I fit in that demographic. But we learned the game from older people. We didn't come up seeing that. We came up seeing niggas gang banging but it was niggas older than us. Not niggas our age now, so we knew the right way to do it. It's a different in being a gang banger and a gang member. You don't even have niggas gang banging now. Niggas just banging. Look you can be whatever you are. We Vice Lords and that's under the 5, however you got Vice Lords riding under the 6 laws (Vice Lords and other gangs that are part of the People's nation, which are Islamic groups that consist of the 5 pillars. Those pillars being; Love, Truth, Peace, Freedom and Justice. Typically, this is called "riding under the 5" for short. Gangster Disciples/GD's and other gangs that are part of the Folk's nation are Christian gangs. These gangs use the Star of David as reminders of their Christian roots and obligations as ones. The star of David has 6 points and members of these gangs typically call this "riding under the 6" for short.) You got Vice Lords and GD's clicking up because they off the same block. That what you see out south. But it's that not what you think it is because they don't even know.

In this theme, there are many things that contribute to the violence in Chicago. We can see based on the background of the gang members, laws of the gangs (going against), who they see as their biggest threat and what it is like being in the middle situation where the possibly of losing your life is a very real chance. The participants of the study really let the readers of study see how it is when things hit the fan. But how did it get this like this? For clarification of the

Research Question 1: Perceptions of the Causes of Gang Violence in Chicago

All 13 participants explained that it all started at when growing up. They typically mentioned that love was not shown at home, and they left the home and they joined the gangs to fill that void left by not having a traditional home environment. Many participants referred to their gang as a family. With family comes obligations like selling drugs to make sure you own crew eats, harming someone that has harmed your family, or it can be as simple as beefing with another gang that rides under a different star. These ideas are common in

the upbringing in Chicago and set the mentality of not only the gang members themselves but Chicago as a whole.

Upbringing: “I had to keep it in the bloodline.” When many participants were asked why they joined, they gave a story of their family unit in explanation. Here Q explains the start of gang bang and how it is affected by the family unit.

How people grew up like the term is on the porch and off the porch, basically like you grew up off the porch you came into shit early like violence, doing this, having to survive on your own rather than being hand fed or your parents got it good you don’t gotta ask for nothing you ain’t gotta go out and get it, stuff like tryin to get no quick money. But, then you got the people [on the porch] who were hand fed who got it good, they wanna be urban they wanna be like the people who gotta go out there and grind for it cuz they feel like ah they get the most girls, they get this, they get this, they always fleek, but the whole time the other ones on the other end they rather have it easy, so that’s where it gets like kinda complicated but that’s like the two distinctions.

In this section we see how Woo and Tune started gang banging within the same set as their family, as it was their family tradition. Woo and Tune also shared that family members have gotten many years in jail based on their lifestyles, but they still chosen this path but specified that they are going about it in a different way.

First we have Tune, a person who shared a revealing detail of his family history with gang banging. Tune told the researcher he could use this story in his research study. However, he did not want his voice on recorder telling this story based on this being a federal case. He said his family was heavy into drug dealing in Chicago and became so big that the federal government had to come in to catch his family members. When caught, everything the family had was taken, and uncles, cousins and brothers were indicted on federal charges and his family developed a name among the Chicago police department. This has led to some of the harassment he gets by the cops. Some of the hardest things to hear from Tune were that over the years in jail, his brother has become increasing delusional. He said that he can’t even visit him as it hurt to see him not even recognize him and seeing mental health increasingly deteriorate.

Woo also stated that he got his start within the family, saying, “My uncle. My uncle and my cousin. They were part of the life, and the life was in my house. It’s always been a part of my life.” He also added the impact of being raised by the streets, saying,

Society creates its own monsters and America eats its own babies. Think how many people you know work good as jobs 9-5 and don’t get a break? I ain’t finna lie; the shit I did I enjoy doing it. But what can you expect when you’re raised by wolves? Fuck I am going to do? Act like a puppy? Fuck out of here. You gone act like a wolf. By the grace of god, he blessed us with comprehension and with people in front of us to show that we have our own mind. It’s cool to follow but you follow so you can lead. Because you have to learn. What’s the greatest way to learn? Through experience. You have to bust your ass and head to know that concrete hurts.

Finally, we have Sweet Pea, a gang banger since 15, who talked about how the life choose him when he was young based on family situations.

I ain’t choose shit. I was raised in it. I when off what I was seeing and it came to what was in you fucking heart. Simple fact is you have to follow your heart. If you gone shoot a motherfucker, go shoot a motherfucker. At the same time, that ain’t the cool thing to do.

In this section all participants talked about how they got started in this life. The majority of the participants tell a similar story about how they had a family member in the gang and not only did they start gang bang but they joined the same gang as other members of their families.

Chicago mentality: “You can’t even walk down the street with your kids, because motherfuckers are shooting kids.” In this section we see how gang members perceive the Chicago mentality. All participants talked about the gang banging and the mentality that comes with it. But some also talked about how even if people don’t gang bang they have to still be careful based on the nature of Chicago. First we see Woo talking about how he and another participant, Boom, could be expected to be the classified as gang members and give the same negative stereotypes that are associated with although Boom doesn’t gang bang but is an associate of many of the members.

Yeah you feel me. There some niggas that live in the jungle. I feel like classification solely depends on the person's that classifying. Me and Boom could walk up the street together and the police could pull us over. Now this is a college educated black man. I have never been to college. He dresses entirely different from me. You know I dress like I am in the streets and he don't really dress as he is in the street. He dresses in a more civilized manner. Just for the simple fact that he got stopped with me he will be classified as what I am. We do come from the same area, which is predominantly Vice Lords. From what I believe they know. I have been classified as that, even without telling them what I was by the police. It solely depends on the intellectual level of the person who is doing the classifying. Because you have police that are not from here that don't know shit about over here. They going to tell you what they think you are and they will put you in the system as what they believe you are. Depending on where they stop you at or why they stop you.

Woo also added a statement about profiling when it comes to minorities in Chicago that can lead to the mentally of the police that serve in Chicago.

You have to look at it, too, man. We live in a violent society. Violence is a norm of handling situations in an urban environment, a poverty stricken area. When poverty is increased so is crime. So the police that are policing that area has to change their approach. I am not saying the shit they're doing is right but some motherfuckers make it worse for the next motherfucker. Now it's just like walking in the room seeing the same person. A room with a 100 people but they look like the same people. The first motherfucker that walks up to you steal on you, so the next motherfucker walks up to you, you think is more likely to steal off me because they look just like the last person that stole off you. To them, we all look the same. That shit foul to think like that but as a race of people we have to change our ways. Because I don't believe it's only one side to fix a problem. God don't work like that and life wasn't created like that.

Gang member mentality: "It's a different in being a gang banger and a gang member." During the interviews many participants touched on the difference between gang bangers and gang members. A gang member can be anybody in the gang but they don't necessary have to be part of any criminal actions. They could just be affiliated because they grew up with a group and hang out with them but work at a legitimate 9-5 job. Gang bangers are a people that understand the laws of the streets and choose to live by them in order to get his or her money by any means necessary.

In our first statement we see Theo talk about how gang violence can start using gang mentality.

To be honest this shit happened when they started breaking down the projects. In the projects everybody was family. That's your family, you stay here forever. In this one specific building. When they started breaking them down, they started to shoot people out here. Here and there, here and there. The section 8 shit. And guess what they collecting? Free rent. "I like they apartment right here, let's get this". You're a G.D (Gangster Disciple). and these Vice Lords. You a G.D. getting this money over in the projects and you got Vice Lords getting money over here. You think since you moved over here, you about to get some money? "Aw, no no pal." Gang violence!

Knowing the difference between gang bangers and gang members seem to be little known outside the inner circle of gangs. Participants stated that many groups get this confused like activist groups and more importantly law enforcement. Below is a statement from G Ball, a gang member since 2007 who has no criminal history and works a 9-5 job. G Ball gives an account of the confusion by the police officers, saying,

They look at everybody, I don't know they look at us all like we on the same shit, like we the gang bangers, we the ones doing it. We could be chilling on the porch and they would stop us and stress us out and do all the extra shit. But the motherfuckers doing all that walk straight in front of them. You can't tell which motherfuckers on bullshit and who's not?

This section showcased how gang banging starts, the loss of family that comes with being in a gang and how you can be in a gang and not gang bang but do it simply for family purposes. Section can really fill in the factors that programs and groups can look into targeting to help gang members, due to the warning signs that it displays. Overall all participants had the same start but different on outlooks really showing how multifaceted gang members can be. Knowing this we have to look at different approaches to help find situations to stop the violence.

Research Question 2: Chicago Gang Members' Perceptions of Solutions to Gang Violence

After the first questions about the nature of the problems and situations in Chicago, questions regarding situation were asked to the gang members. There were two subthemes about how these problems might be fixed.

Create trust in the system: "Police are a gang. Just with a badge." The most common answer was to fix the policing as the participants felt it was the primary reason for their oppression, believing it was a combination of race and class oppression. Participants felt powerless against the law. Believing any interaction between law enforcement was a dictatorship and action to defend themselves was met with severe consequences. Stories of these consequences involved disrespect of their dead family members, a beating, getting drugs or pistols planned on them leading to jail time or even death. Many participants stated that with all these accusations, how is it possible that the police get off all the time, stating that it is just logically not possible that everyone is lying or the cops are always right. Participants brought up the logistics of the officers always being right or the city always saying the officers acted in compliance to the law. Even with the recent media outcry of police violence, there is the very real history of police abuse in the black community. This has led to a mistrust of the system in not only gangs but also in the black community of Chicago. Participants stated that this mistrust and history with law enforcement has made many in the community unsafe as whole. Participants stated that the community has adopted a "no snitching" code in many black community as they don't feel that officers do their jobs. These no snitching codes have allowed killers and drug dealers to stay on the streets while the police harass the innocent. Below was a statement from Noonie, a now retired gang member, giving his input on the police department and changes to be made to ensure the safety of the community.

They need some reconstruction in the police force right now. I am a person that went through some of it in my younger years. We used to wait at the bus stop and we would see some of the cops, ex-gang bangers who were cops on the force. Like when it was raining outside, they would purposefully ride by a puddle and splat us. I even saw them turn around and laugh at us. And, by us being shocked, we didn't get a chance to write their license plate down. Also there're a lot of crooked cops.

Activism: "I can't really say I rock with them. I like the concept of it." When the BLM group was brought up, the researcher was shocked that many gang members did not know much about the group and did not know anyone that is part of the group. Most participants said they like the concept of the movement but believed that BLM members do not know anything about gangs or the reasons for the violence. However, many participants felt if BLM members came to talk to them, they would understand. When the researcher told the participants of the group's principles and activist reasons such as the advocacy of the LBGT, many participants told the researcher that they still liked the concept but others said they do not agree with the group. This is what Tune had to say on the subject when he found out the BLM advocates for LGBT rights:

Man I don't rock with that shit. They need to get on a different part of town with that shit. I don't want my daughter walking down the street and see two niggas kissing. I don't want my daughter walking down the street and see two girls kissing. They need they own town. Kids are going to see that and think they want to be gay. It's fucking up our generation.

Here is what G Ball said about the BLM efforts:

Protesting shit, yeah that shit doesn't work. I really don't think protesting works we really just stopping traffic. I do know how it works. All they do is have a person standing outside all day until you leave. That all that's going to happen. Then tomorrow the same shit was going to go on. You didn't do shit but stop traffic downtown, downtown is already fucked up. You people vandalizing buildings 'n shit, that shit ain't helping, it just fucks up our community.

Finally, Woo gives his perspective on the group. He voices he optimism for the group but is reluctant to give his approval on the group.

And even before it was national known and brought it to everyone's attention. They been killing us for forever. I believe in the 1940's the first domestic terrorist was [white Americans] using an airplane [to kill blacks] was by the sheriff department in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And I think the Black Lives Matters is doing it the legit way. I

feel they have a chance to become like the Huey P Newtons and Fred Hamptons. They have a chance to speak on our racial injustices in a non-violent setting. I believe all lives matter period, because I am a god's child and love has no color. He made us equal in every facet of the word. In the image of him and I stand firm in that. Everybody don't use the Black Lives Matter moment in a way that would push black lives up. Motherfuckers use it to push their own agenda. Like that why I really feel like when you say black lives matters. To be 100 percent if you not black you really say what it is to be black. I truly believe you can learn by experiencing the lives of others but you have to be close to them. If a white man tells me he with the black lives, I am going to ask him how many black friends do you have? How many black people are you close with? That lives in these areas and the areas where you protesting at. How close is your relationship to them? Because you'll never truly know what it is to be a black man in America. So you can only see through the experience of someone else. Overall, just like with all things you have to research it. Everything that you do to get the full magnitude of it. I know the black lives matters sounds catchy but I don't believe shit they put on TV. I know it's 10% true and the rest of that shit is fictitious propaganda. If you want to do something and you want to learn something you have to do your diligent.

This section reveals a lot about the future that many of the participants see. Not many see a way out. They also have no faith in the system or activist groups. Many participants see the police as part of the problem. They also don't have any connection to any activist groups and don't believe they have a voice. It is sad because you get the sense that the participants see everything as bad. From their birth, history of police from the past on blacks or people that are part of their family, the start of gang banging, the situations that gang banging get people in, gang banging making it impossible to see their families, the consistent battles with law enforcement and the feeling that even groups that supposed to be fighters for the cause don not even care about their voices. It is truly a hopeless look at life. The information provided in this study has a dialogue that can be beneficial to research. Below I will go more in-depth with the finding of this research and the possible uses for future research.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to gain the perception of the violence in Chicago from the city's gang members, understand how the violence became this way and gaining the perspectives on how to fix the problems the city has with violence. Each participant had different experiences, different ways they saw Chicago and overall outlook on life. Even with these differences, many themes and subthemes of similar views emerged in the study.

RQ1: Chicago Gang Members' Perceptions of Gang Violence and its Causes

The themes that emerged from RQ1 were frequency of violence in Chicago, biggest threats in Chicago and perception of violence in Chicago. The bulk of conversation in the interview revolved around the violence in Chicago. Peneley (2012) stated that "statistics do show that a relatively small group of neighborhoods yields almost all of the violence in the city and that most offenders are African American men who live in neighborhoods on the West or South sides of the city, but these statistics should not allow police to create laws that are only applicable to those targeted areas. Allowing police to apply laws exclusively to certain parts of the city is unjust and discriminatory because it allows for enforcement largely based on racial classifications and socioeconomic factors" (p. 61) In this article we see that violence in Chicago is often isolated to certain section of Chicago. However, this isn't portrayed in the media and this leaves stereotypes to run wild and contribute to the violence. It also shows that based on the crime rate in Chicago and the violence being isolated in very small areas of the city that, these gang members were almost certain to be victims and or the perpetrators of violence in some point of their lives.

If we take this thinking into Stuart Hall's theory, we can assume that many of the situations are a way to keep the natural idea of hegemony into effect. With many media influences setting the stage for the way we think of individuals, especially groups that are perceived to be violent and don't deserve an opinion. This was displayed in many cases in this research but none more telling than when S.G.'s sister was handcuffed for talking and the outrage of S.G. about this incident led to more of a problem. In this situation S.G. or his sister had no power and the police department could be seen as part of the hegemony that wanted to keep it that way.

This study also sought to understand why the violence in Chicago takes place and the participants' views and lives with these factors. Three major themes came about in this section, those being: upbringing,

Chicago mentality and gang mentality. Stoddard et. al (2010) said, “Living in environments characterized by high levels of poverty and violence can have powerful negative impacts on young people’s sense of hope” (p. 3) This correlates with upbringing and the involvement or avoidance of gang culture in all of our participants. Growing in Chicago’s poorer neighborhoods has given all participants the Chicago mentality, which is that anything can happen at any moment and always be prepared to defend themselves. Gang members also expressed a sense of hopelessness. During the interviews participants discussed a gang member who was killed recently. The most common statement about his death was “This is what comes with it”.

In this area we see a crash of other research. Based on other research we know the effects of a childhood that has higher risk factors than others. In the cultural studies theory, we can see how these risk factors are expressed differently in not only the media but somewhat the cultural, meaning these risk factors can play role in any life but the way we report it and look at it after we are influence by the hegemony of social effects depiction of it in the power structure of social for particular groups.

RQ3: Possible Solutions to this Violence

In this section the objective was to ask participants about their solutions for the violence in Chicago and gain perspectives on the Black Lives Matter social movement as a popular and current source for discussion on improving conditions. This section was pretty tough as it was going on what personal views they had on the situations. The main finding was that many participants did not know much about the BLM which within itself is interesting based on the idea that Chicago violence in isolated small areas of the city that are predominately African American and these isolated areas also make the most constant areas for police violence. I pose the question, is the group doing enough communicating within their own target group?

This is one of the biggest, most important findings in the current study. This paints a completely different picture for groups like the BLM. When we apply Hall’s theory to this section, we can almost say that the in the eyes of the participants the BLM group is *contributing to, or reinforcing hegemony*. Their ideas are based off the perceived problems of black individuals are having with law enforcement but they are not seeking out the information or situation from the actual group. This reinforces hegemony, as a group that already that does not have a voice in the power structure, also does not have a voice in their own salvation or solutions to their problems.

Limitations

There were a few limitations of this research. The first is that all participants were males. Although females make a smaller percentage of gangs and are less like likely to experience the violence the same type of violence as their male counterparts, it still would have been a vastly different experience to study females as well. Secondly, the study did not interview any police officers or BLM members. Their perspectives on gangs could have helped start a dialogue between the groups and offer the more sides to the research. Thirdly, the study only interviewed two gangs (Vice Lords both Traveling VL’s and Conservative VL’s and one member of the New Breeds but he’s clicked up with the Vice Lords and has problems within his own gang). Finally, because past research on this topic was so limited, it was challenging to conceptualize this study. This limitation made it hard to analyze the group before prior to interviews and makes the research solely dependent on the interviews.

Future Research

Future research in this field could compare interviews from not only different gangs but also from the BLM members and police officers. This will be interesting and possibly be used to break down barriers and stereotypes that have been manifesting for years within each group. This will also give each group a chance to give their point of views on the violence and offer ways to stop it. Most importantly it will put a face to the group, a personality, a soul. Often during the interviews, many gang members thought of white oeioke and police officer’s as the same. This created a false narrative in their mind. As all white people were given an identity that not true to the group or and likewise to the officers. This created an underline race tension between the groups that really doesn’t have to be there.

Conclusion

Overall this study has discovered information that has not been previously researched. Using cultural studies theory, we see that many cultural groups are portrayed in a poor light based on the hegemony of society. Groups that can have the same life as anyone else in this country are given the backseat based on the nature of our views in this country. The participants in this study displayed a willingness to let many of us into their lives to showcase what they have been through and witness a group that lacks power within this society. All participants expressed joy in letting everyone know they have a voice and they are not another statistic that you see on the news station at night when you hear “on tonight’s new another gang member was shot dead. Now here is Bob with a look at sports”. They want to let everyone know that each one these people have a family and soul like you. When taking a deep look the research using the cultural studies theory, we can say that if it were not for the factors of hegemony and the power structure we live in, this can be any one of us. Thanks to all who participated.

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