

Transforming School Culture by Containing Gangs and Creating Safer Communities

(2) RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Violence threatens the lives of youth in neighborhoods and schools throughout the United States. At one time, youth violence seemed to afflict only impoverished neighborhoods overrun with gangs, predominantly urban, and overwhelmingly comprised of people of color. Today, the issue of youth violence resonates among all Americans as it extends beyond these boundaries of cities, the poor, gangs, gender, and race (Friday, 1998). Violence permeates schools and communities across socio-economic status and jeopardizes the futures of our youth.

The issue of violence is not a new phenomenon, but how we respond to violence and define crime has transformed schools, changed communities, and has led to the criminalization of youth. In California, fear of violence has disproportionately affected Latino and African-American youth through suppressive crime policy. Our response to crime has exacerbated under representation of Latinos in higher educational institutions by further alienating Latino youth in school. It has also contributed to the overwhelmingly overrepresentation of Latinos in correctional facilities by changing definitions of crime in school and the community (Moore, 1981, Noguera, 1995).

As suppressive crime policy and restrictive educational policy take hold on schools, young people become victims of criminalization under the banner of promoting school and community safety. In other words, schools are fast becoming an extension of the criminal justice system. Moreover, educational attainment is becoming subordinate to the law enforcement goals of crime suppression. The end result is alarming for the state of California, as more Latino youth will be preparing for life in a correctional facility rather than the higher education system.

My project will analyze the criminalization of youth by examining civil gang injunctions in Norwalk, California. I will employ multiple methods to look at crime suppression policy and shed light on school-based partnerships with municipal governments. The primary goal of this study is to analyze the efficacy of gang injunctions and its chilling effect on students. How do we define success when analyzing this controversial policy? In addition, this research will help bridge the gap between research literatures in the fields of education, urban planning, and policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My research addresses how municipal policy, through civil gang injunctions, impacts youth and their perceptions of safety at school and in the community. In addressing gangs as a problem, schools rely on local government in the areas of policy and enforcement. The culture of the school is greatly affected by the success of municipal government to contain gangs. This dissertation will help bridge the gaps in literature in the areas of safe schools, gangs, and community policing. These areas of research greatly contribute to development of educational and criminal justice policy.

I have selected the city of Norwalk because it is my hometown and I am very familiar with its neighborhoods, institutions, and gang dynamics. Furthermore, city officials have granted me access to restricted data in the Public Safety Department, L.A. County Sheriff's Department, as well as support from the local school districts. Norwalk has been nationally recognized as one of America's safest cities, despite the long-standing history of gangs that date back to the 1940's. Norwalk's Department of Public Safety has received numerous accolades for its efforts in community policing and success in creating safer communities. In the 1990's, Norwalk emerged as a leader in addressing gangs and youth violence by adopting one of the nation's first civil gang injunctions in 1994. This extreme form of a gang suppression policy complemented the traditional approaches of gang prevention and intervention. Furthermore, it transformed municipal relationships with schools, youth, businesses, and the community.

Research on gangs in the United States dates back to Thrasher's classic piece in 1927 (Huff, 1993, in Goldstein and Huff, editors). Most gang research focuses on why youth join gangs, why gangs exist, and efforts to address gangs through policy, intervention, suppression, and prevention. Since Thrasher's piece, a vast amount of research has attempted to study the phenomenon of gangs. In the late 1980's and 1990's, a new wave of research on gangs emerged. Notably, Irving Spergel led a research team to produce *The National Youth Gang Survey* (Spergel, 1987). One of Spergel's main contributions relevant to this study was his finding that gangs are present within the boundaries of every major school district in the United States. The City of Norwalk is a classic example of this case where gangs reside in particular schools within regions.

In addition to the National Youth Gang Survey, James Vigil examined gangs as a product of multiple marginality (Vigil, 1988). Vigil's work identified factors that contributed to the formation of gangs including segregation, poverty, poor school performance, little parental supervision, discrimination, and distrust of law enforcement. This important work pushed previous research to question the causality of gangs beyond cultural or individual factors. Vigil argued that gang research must look at structural forces that contribute to the persistence of gangs.

One of the most influential works on gangs was the *Gang Intervention Handbook* in 1993 (Goldstein and Huff, 1993). This edited volume provided an interdisciplinary look at gangs, including school-based interventions. In 2001, Grogger examined gang injunctions, particularly their success rate in reducing violent crime. Grogger provides important early evidence of the success of gang injunctions, but falls short of examining how this policy leads to the criminalization of youth.

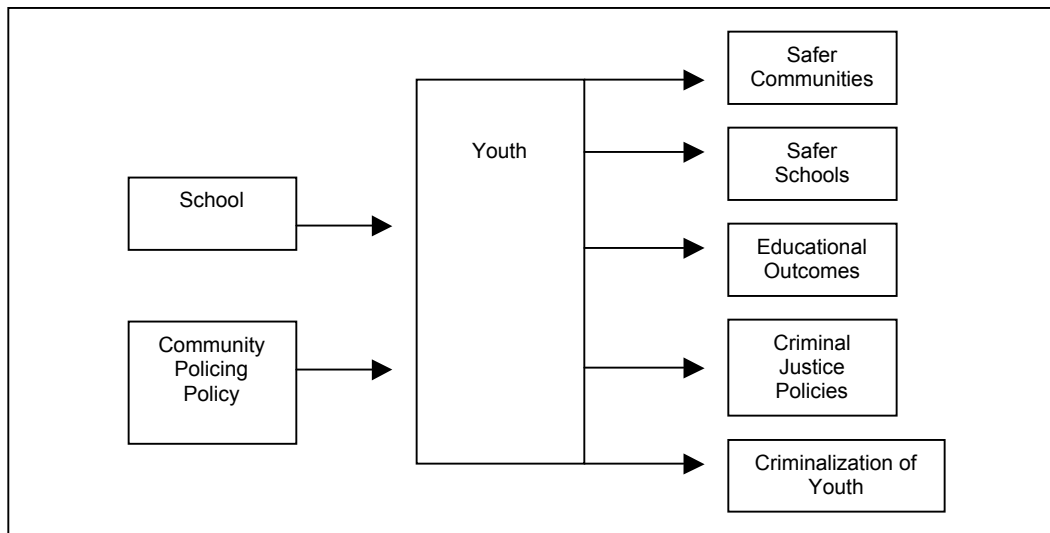
Since the wave of gang research of the 1980's and 1990's, several important events have changed the landscape of gangs in the United States. Most notable is the gang truce in the early 1990's that played a big role in reducing crime. Another big transformation has been the movement of school policy toward "zero-tolerance," which has transformed crime in our nation's public schools. This study is timely and critical to better understanding the multiple stakeholders and facets of community safety.

The "safe schools movement" and "community policing efforts" have reconstructed the concept of the school as a policing agent, particularly for underserved and underrepresented communities. The safe schools movement acknowledges the role of external influence on their policies, but falls short of understanding the individual and institutional effects these external policies have played in transforming the culture of the school. Community policing efforts focus attention at the prevention, intervention, and suppression of youth crime at the individual level. Community policing policy and practice would benefit from the institutional insight of the safe

schools movement. Thus, this study will reveal the interdependent relationship between municipal policy and school safety efforts—representing the new face of the urban school.

Figure 1 represents the factors that influence the containment of crime among youth. The figure suggests that community policing policies (e.g. gang injunction) and schools, influence youth in the process of promoting safer communities, safer schools, positive educational outcomes, and criminal justice policy. This study will examine the impact of these two entities and their interdependence. Does this interdependent relationship in fact lead to safer communities? Are youth criminalized in the process?

Figure 1: Factors Influencing Crime Containment among Youth



DISSERTATION OUTLINE

The following represents the outline of the core dissertation chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Chapter 4: Gang Injunctions: Do they work?

Chapter 5: The Impact of Crime Containment Policy on Youth

Chapter 6: Crime Containment Policy and the Transformation of School Culture

Chapter 7: Recommendations and Conclusions

My research project is consistent with the objectives of the UC ACCORD by examining the impact of crime containment policy and the transformation of school culture. Creating safe school environments for underrepresented students is a high priority—understanding the cost associated with enforcing safer schools is equally important to ensuring positive life options for at-risk youth. My research will help inform youth and community stakeholders in the struggle to improve school safety and prioritize educational success. It also provides a model for statewide policymakers around the issues of school-based partnerships for safe communities.

(3) PROPOSED METHODS OF STUDY

The primary objective of this research is to provide a valuable framework for understanding how cities can partner with schools to provide safer communities without criminalizing youth. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do civil gang injunctions lead to safer communities? What are the consequences of civil gang injunctions on how crime is defined, the location of crime, and the incarceration of youth? What are the implications of gang suppression policy on perceptions of safety?
- 2) What impact does gang suppression policy have on the role of schools in the criminal justice system? What can we learn from school-based partnerships with municipal government and law enforcement?

The answers to these questions will lead to a greater understanding of gang suppression policy and its impact on youth as well as shed some light on school-based partnerships with municipal government. Conclusions will be derived from qualitative and quantitative research conducted in the City of Norwalk, California. To answer these questions, I will use several data sources that I began collecting last year. In addition, my project will use original data collection procedures.

Descriptive demographic data from multiple data sets including the U.S. Census and the California Basic Educational Data System will provide important community profiles. Data on specific geographically-defined gang neighborhoods will also be explored to test current theories in the literature regarding gang member socio-economic indicators. Crime data from the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District Safe School Assessment database, L.A. County Sheriff's Department, and the City of Norwalk Department of Public Safety will provide context regarding community safety and gang activity. These data will be used to test the severity of gang activity and the perceptions of safety held by youth.

As part of my research, I will conduct focus groups and individual interviews of gang members in an effort to listen to the youth directly. The focus groups will be coordinated with four middle schools and two high schools. The focus groups and interviews will cover the following topics: (1) Life in the City of Norwalk, (2) Schools in Norwalk, (3) Gangs in Norwalk. In particular, the youth will be asked about issues of school safety, gangs, dress codes, juvenile citations, parent responsibility, and violence. The focus groups will provide rich qualitative data to answer my research questions regarding youth criminalization.

Qualitative methods will be applied to the focus group and interview transcripts to understand the key themes that emerge from Norwalk youth, city officials and school administrators. It will be particularly important to understand whether commonalities exist among the student responses (Huberman and Miles, 2002). The transcripts will be analyzed to understand the following: Has the concept of safe schools become reconstructed to represent controlled environments? Further, in establishing these safe environments, is the approach balanced or imbalanced toward punitive measures rather than proactive approaches to overall community health? Are certain ethnic groups adversely affected by these policies? Do the responses vary by gang neighborhood? How do youth responses coincide/differ from Norwalk's leadership?

In addition to the qualitative efforts, this research project will include a student survey administered at five middle schools and two high schools. The survey will be coordinated with

the schools to choose classrooms randomly by grade level to participate in this study. Over 1,000 surveys will be conducted.

Quantitative methods will be applied to the survey data to reveal key issues confronting Norwalk youth. My research will explore the relationship between several key variables such as Gender, Ethnicity, Grade Level, Location of School (gang territory or not), Student Achievement, Family Education, Employment, Immigration, and Relationship Status. These variables help create an aggregate profile of Norwalk's students. The survey will reveal whether or not the perceptions held by youth align with crime statistics. Moreover, the findings will share student perspectives on crime policy in school and their community.

Table 1 below illustrates the data collection procedures that will be conducted to examine the impact of civil gang injunctions among Norwalk youth.

Table 1: Summary of Data Collection Procedures

Data	Source	Quantity	Timeline	Purpose/Objective
Demographic Data	U.S. Census CBEDS	N=103,211 N=20,159	Jan 04 to Dec 04 <i>(Completed)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assess demographic trends by geographically defined gang neighborhoods.
Crime Data	City of Norwalk & L.A. County Sheriff's Dept. ¹	N=103,211	Jan 04 to June 05 <i>(Complete & Ongoing)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To reveal reduction/increase of Part 1² crimes inside/outside of geographically defined gang neighborhoods. To examine impact of gang injunctions on crime spatially and by gang member status.
Youth Focus Groups	4 Middle Schools and 2 High Schools. ³	4 one hour sessions per school	Nov 04 to Mar 05 <i>(Partially completed)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine youth perceptions of school and community safety. Engage youth about safety policies, such as dress codes, juvenile citations, and parent responsibility.
Interviews	Gang Members, City Leadership, and Schools	30 GM 10 CL 10 LE <hr/> 50 Total	Jun 05 to Dec 05 <i>(June 05 Begin)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triangulate research to gain a better understanding of school-based partnerships with the city officials, school administrators, and the community.
Youth Surveys	5 Middle Schools and 2 High Schools	N =1000 ~150 per school	Sep 04 to Nov 05 <i>(Partially completed)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask youth directly regarding perceptions of school safety, violence suppression policy, and school-based partnership efforts with the City.

These multiple methods provide a comprehensive approach to answering the proposed research questions regarding the impact of gang suppression policy on youth perceptions of safety. Furthermore, this research will help bridge the gaps in literature across the fields of urban planning, education, and policy. The findings from my research will contribute to the discourse surrounding school-based partnerships with local communities.

¹ The City of Norwalk has agreed to provide access to Department of Public Safety data and L.A. County Sheriff's data pertaining to Norwalk, including Operation Safe Streets data.

² Part 1 crimes include homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny theft, grand theft auto, and arson.

³ Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, Little Lake City School District, and Santa Fe High School have agreed to participate in the study.