societies

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The Rise of Drug Dealing in the Life of the North American Street Gang

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Received: 2 August 2018; Accepted: 15 September 2018; Published: 18 September 2018

Abstract: Historical gang literature traditionally perceived street gangs as boisterous outfits occasionally engaged in delinquency. In recent decades however, street gang behavior has come to be seen ever more as encroaching upon criminality, primarily due to its involvement in drug supply. This article aims to provide a brief historical review as to how the practice of drug supply entered into the life of the street gang, with specific emphasis on The War on Drugs in the 1970s and the rise of the crack cocaine economy in the 1980s.

Keywords: gangs; drug sales; violence; War on Drugs; organized crime

1. Introduction

What do gang members do? Research tells us that the vast majority of a gang member's time is spent "hanging out" and not doing very much [1]. But, research also tells us that compared to their non-gang peers, gang members engage in a disproportionate amount of delinquent/criminal activity [2]. For this reason, participation in delinquent/criminal activity has increasingly become part of the definition of a gang. Some complain about the "logical circularity" [3] (p. 4) of defining gangs in terms of offending patterns—namely that it renders "tautological" any empirical relationship between gangs and crime [4] (p. 11). However, scholars have found that without delinquent/criminal activity, the definition of gangs is over-inclusive and the study of gangs is practically meaningless [1]. Today, therefore, the "consensus" definition of a gang reads, "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" [5] (p. 20).

The study of gangs once was the study of delinquency [6], but from the 1920s to the 1970s, gangs were not a major focus of criminal justice policy. Instead, street gangs were a curiosity, a laboratory, and perceived publicly as boisterous young peer groups from working-class ethnic communities that displayed some subcultural values [7,8]. Amid rising juvenile violent crime in the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was a notable shift in gang research emphasis, what Pitts [9] (p. 10) describes as a "correctional turn" from etiology to control. Solving the gang problem soon became a national priority. Spurred by sensationalist media coverage of a "new breed" [10] (p. 23) of "fatherless, Godless, and jobless" juvenile "super-predators" [11] (p. 27) and an impending juvenile "crime wave storm" [12] that never actually materialized, legislatures across the country limited judicial discretion and adopted a more punitive stance toward juvenile gang offenders. North America went to war against gangs.

The question is, what changed? How did gangs go from spontaneous peer groups i.e., [13] to public enemy number one? This article argues that the answer lies in understanding another war that North America was waging toward the end of the Twentieth Century—the War on Drugs. The overlap between gangs and drug sales is well-documented in the literature e.g., [14–16], including outside of the United States [9,17–19], but the influence that illicit drugs had on gang proliferation, organization, and violence in the U.S. is a story only partially told e.g., [20–22]. The narrative goes something like this: gangs seized upon the availability of illicit drugs, particularly crack cocaine, as a means of income. In poor urban areas hollowed out by deindustrialization and cut off from economic opportunity by racial discrimination, crack cocaine provided one of few lucrative incomes for young men of color, so more people joined gangs to gain access to crack cocaine to sell. However, grievances in illicit drug markets could not be settled through legal channels, so gang members settled them violently. This led to escalation because gangs carried lethal weapons and sought to portray themselves as excessively violent so as not to be cheated in the market. As drug markets became saturated and gang-related homicides reached unprecedented highs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gang members began migrating from large urban centers to smaller towns and cities to establish new markets. This gave rise to gang franchising or importation, whereby gangs from big cities either colonized gangs in other locations or recruited local youth to establish their own gangs. The result was the national proliferation of gangs, further facilitated by the mass incarceration of gang members in state and federal correctional facilities across the country, and the diffusion of gang styles and sensibilities via popular culture [23].

There is strong evidence that illicit drug markets can drive sudden shifts in serious violence [24]. Many academics believe the crack cocaine "epidemic" was one of the main reasons for the sharp rise in homicide and robbery through the late 1980s and early 1990s [25]. Some drugs, like crack cocaine, have even been linked to violence *directly* via their psychoactive effects and *indirectly* via robberies to service drug dependence [26,27]. Like all narratives, however, there is fact and fiction in the history of systemic (gang-related) violent competition between drug sellers outlined above. The aim of this article, therefore, is to add some important cultural and historical context to this narrative and to more clearly align the literature on gangs with the literature on drug markets.

2. The War on Drugs

The danger the illicit drug trade poses to North American society is a theme that has persisted in the political discourse since the days of Harry Anslinger [28], the first director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Anslinger's testimony before Congress, for example, was instrumental in passing the 1937 Marihuana Tax Act, which for the first time, criminalized marijuana use under federal law. Anslinger's prohibitionist anti-drug tactics served as a blueprint for subsequent "drug czars" in the rhetorical War on Drugs, a program to stop the distribution, production, and use of illegal drugs, which began in earnest after U.S. President Richard Nixon [29] called drugs "public enemy number one in the United States".

The War on Drugs ultimately presents drugs as a macro destructive force, yet as McPhee [30] argues, drugs are not inherently ruinous; they become so when combined with certain socio-economic and political conditions. Notably, racism was at the heart of many early drug laws and to this day, black and minority ethnic populations are targets for increased drug enforcement and stricter sentencing conditions [31]. Mexican migrants were the focus of early anti-marijuana legislation and fear of "Negro cocaine fiends" allegedly assaulting white women in the South [32] and debaucherous Chinese-Americans running underground opium dens in the coastal states, helped sell the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act to Congress in 1914, regulating opiates and coca products. This is important context considering the similarly racialized construction of gangs and gang responses [33,34]. The bottom line, as Inglis [35] points out, is that drugs alone are not inherently good or bad and neither is their sale or distribution—hence the medicalization, decriminalization, and outright legalization of certain drugs in certain contexts.

3. The Curious Case of Cocaine

All drugs are not created equal. Cocaine, a strong stimulant mostly used as a recreational drug, has a storied history, from its first medical uses to its inclusion in the original recipe for Coca-Cola [36]. Cocaine is a naturally occurring substance found in the coca plant, which is mostly grown in Peru and Bolivia, then produced in Colombia, South America. As Gootenberg [37] notes, prior to the Second World War, cocaine was legal throughout most of Latin America and it was a largely peaceful enterprise. Following the War, however, U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America focused on the containment of a communist threat through the creation of a unified hemispheric defense, and as a result, the United States began influencing domestic affairs in areas synonymous with drug production [38]. The United States emerged from World War II as the uncontested power in global drug affairs, and in supporting directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations abroad, it projected its prohibitionist ideals into global policy; assisted by compliant anti-communist regimes and covert collaborations between its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and actors operating in Latin America [39,40].

Gootenberg [41] argues that two Cold War developments in particular created conditions conducive to the expansion of an illicit cocaine industry. First, in 1959, the Cuban revolutionary government expelled Havana traffickers who, in turn, migrated to South America, Mexico, and Miami, Florida. This, in turn, established potential trade routes and future trafficking networks, with the exiles becoming the first professional cocaine trafficking class. Second, the Bolivian government's fight for supremacy over the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement in 1961 resulted in a U.S.-backed campaign which drove thousands of peasants into the remote coca frontiers in the Bolivian lowlands. Dispersal of peasants already entrenched in illegal coca growing, created a convergence of a hardened smuggling-class and a modest peasant-class, laying the groundwork for cocaine's uncontained expansion.

Nixon's War on Drugs was focused primarily on heroin (owing to addiction among returning Vietnam War veterans) and secondarily on marijuana (owing to its association with anti-war youth subcultures) and it expended more resources on domestic rather than international measures [37,42]. Cocaine was a major cash crop in South America, but in 1971, demand for the drug in the United States was limited. Specific targeting of other drugs by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), founded in 1973, however, changed this. As demand for cocaine increased, Colombian trafficking organizations ramped up supply. In 1975, an estimated four tons of cocaine entered the United States from Colombia. By 1980, that figure was over 100 tons annually [43].

The "king of cocaine" was Pablo Escobar [44], an established black marketeer in Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city, who until the late 1970s moved trucks full of illegal goods (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes, and household appliances) into Colombia. Escobar fell into the drug business when his trade in contraband became too risky [45]. Seeing growing international demand for cocaine and lax enforcement, he partnered with underground chemists and producers to repurpose his distribution network for the drug economy. Escobar quickly expanded from small cocaine processing labs to larger labs in the ungoverned rainforest and instituted a distribution system that imported cocaine from South America into the U.S. market using sea and air routes via the Caribbean and the South Florida coast [45]. The first market was Miami, Florida, where cocaine gained notoriety amongst the rich and famous. The Medellín cartel supplied an estimated 80 percent of the cocaine smuggled into the United States at its peak in the late 1980s, making Escobar a billionaire [44].

Violent acts of "narcoterrorism" against the Colombian government, including the massacre of elected officials, eventually became Escobar's undoing, and he was shot and killed by Colombian National Police in 1993 [45]. Public anxiety about "narco" infiltration into the state culminated in Escobar's rivals forming an unlikely alliance with ousted members of his own cartel, as well as with a CIA-backed anti-communist paramilitary group. Organized crime groups adapt [46], and as traditional land and sea routes into the United States were now better policed and in some cases closed-off completely, production and distribution of cocaine shifted to Mexico.

By 1989, about a third of all cocaine destined for the U.S. market was run through Mexico. This made sense given the porous 1989 mile national continental border between the two countries. Mexico's most famous drug trafficker, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán of the Sinaloa Cartel, is credited with pioneering the use of underground tunnels to get drugs into the United States, a method still very much in vogue among drug smugglers [47]. The profits largely outweighed the obvious risks for the early drug traffickers as by the mid-1990s income generated by drugs exports in Mexico, primarily cocaine, were estimated anywhere from $10 billion (according to US figures) to $30 billion (Mexican figures); more than the annual revenue from the country's most profitable legal commodity, oil (estimated at $7.4 billion) (see [48]).

The U.S.-Mexico drug trade also contributed to wider socio-economic and political challenges [37,41,42]. In Mexico, as in Colombia, drug cartels pumped money into electoral campaigns and paid off individual politicians and police officers in the border states. As narcotics flowed north from Mexico, U.S. dollars flowed south, becoming the currency of corruption and extra-legal governance. American guns also flowed south, rendering moot Mexico's strong gun control laws and ratcheting up community violence. In short, the supply and demand economics of the drug economy had huge collateral consequences (see [49,50]). Kenney [51] argues that U.S. policy and practice in Latin America has continued to place U.S. needs over (and to the detriment of) its southern neighbors. In so doing, the United States has contributed greatly to a problem it attributes to others. Constant U.S. intervention overseas effectively resulted in more efficient and more dangerous drug trafficking organizations. By continuing to present drugs as an external or invading threat, the U.S. effectively integrated drug smuggling through conflict (e.g., [52]). Consequently, smugglers have improved drug concealment and business expertise, which continue to grow increasingly complex and vertical. On both sides of the U.S. border, group organization has grown evermore intricate as is evident with the Juarez Cartel—as smugglers—and the 'Bloods' and 'Crips'—as turf controlling street gangs—retaining the pre-existing criteria necessary for being accessible and highly productive outlets for product distribution [20,37].

4. The Crack Cocaine Economy

For much of its history, cocaine was associated as being a 'glamorous' drug. It was expensive and its effects were short-lived, thus it was reserved for the leisure classes occupying positions of privilege [36]. This all changed in the early 1980s when the DEA pressured Colombia, the major supplier of cocaine, into outlawing Ether, the solvent used for converting cocaine base in cocaine hydrochloride (powdered cocaine). Shortly thereafter, cocaine production shifted to the Caribbean (i.e., the Bahamas and Dominican Republic), where the freebasing process relied on sodium bicarbonate instead of ammonia to remove impurities. This cruder process created a huge glut of cocaine powder, which caused the price of cocaine to drop in its key market—the United States. Amid declining profits, drug dealers began dissolving cocaine hydrochloride into water with baking soda and cooking off the liquid to create smaller rocks of the drug that could be smoked. So-called "crack" cocaine was born—a drug that was cheap and easy to produce and sold in small quantities [53].

Crack Cocaine was highly addictive and gave its users an intense high. Unsurprisingly, it became extremely marketable and profitable. Blumstein [54] (p. 10) summarizes its impact as follows:

> Crack appeared on the scene and became a product that was bought by people who didn't have the resources for buying multiple hits, and didn't have places to store it without it being stolen, so that the number of transactions involved became very large. This gave rise to the recruitment of lots of people, and strikingly, lots of young people, who hadn't been in the market as sellers before . . . [They carried guns] to protect themselves because they were carrying lots of valuable stuff; they were in no position to call the police if somebody set upon them . . . This gave rise to an escalating arms race out in the streets among the kids.

The penetration of crack cocaine throughout the U.S. economy gave rise to gangs "organized solely for the purpose of distributing drugs" [55] (p. 4). As Pitts [9] observes, the drugs business requires a "relatively elaborate division of labor within a large workforce, that must maintain and protect the supply chain; market, package and distribute the product, protect the key players, silence would-be whistle blowers, collect debts and ensure contract compliance". Gang members thus were the ideal street level workforce, or "shop floor", of the industry [56]. While some argue drug distribution "organizations" supplanted "gangs" as the primary units of association for young people [57] (p. 45), gangs still offered a number of rational advantages for youth interested in selling drugs: "protection, a controlled territory in which to sell, rules that proscribe turning in a fellow gang member, and a wealth of market information" [58] (p. 85). Drug-selling gangs, in turn, came to be seen by some minority youth as lucrative businesses that represented a culture of resistance by offering opportunities for economic advancement. As Sullivan [59] (p. 245) observed in New York City, time spent peddling drugs was in some instances, not simply culturally conforming, but self-confirming and enhancing:

> They call success in crime 'getting paid' and 'getting over' [the equivalent of 'beating the system'], terms that convey a sense of triumph and of irony which is not accounted for in the grim depiction of their acts as the economic strategies of the disadvantaged . . . Both phrases are spoken in a tone of defiant pride.

Like many corporations in the formal economy, however, drugs gangs typically operated on a two-tier system of core "good" jobs for the privileged few and low-wage, high-risk, dead-end jobs for the majority; and in a fashion that disregarded the welfare of the communities in which they were located [21,60]. Indeed, for poor populations adhering to the class practice of tough masculinities, the distribution of drugs often was associated with intra-class and intra-racial violence [61,62]; see also [63]. As Bourgois [64] (p.326) writes, crack cocaine dealers are "rugged individualists braving an unpredictable frontier where fame, fortune, and destruction are all just around the corner".

It is important to note that the crack cocaine economy did not arise in a vacuum, but rather in response to broader trends in globalization and deindustrialization [65]. The unique historical position black people have held in the U.S economy also cannot be discounted. Beginning in the late 1800s and continuing through the first half of the twentieth century, black southerners, propelled by agricultural poverty, migrated en masse to cities like Los Angeles and Detroit to take industrial jobs. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the U.S. economy underwent drastic restructuring, whereby industrial jobs were either shipped overseas or fell into rapid decline because national markets were absorbed into an ever-expanding global marketplace. What had once been bustling, blue-collar African-American communities subsequently collapsed into "ghettos" hemmed in by freeways, redlining (i.e., systematic housing discrimination), and hostile white neighborhoods. Blacks who missed the move up and out of poverty during Civil Rights or in the economically buoyant 1950s had, by the economically stagnant 1970s, become trapped in a world in which half of young people never finished high school and half of adults were unemployed. This was a world without leadership and positive role models, a world that stood in stark contrast to the adjacent one in which the African-American bourgeoisie had sought refuge and grown [66].

As identified by early Chicago School theorists [13,67], "social disorganization" such as is described here, enabled gangs to take hold and flourish. When combined with an oppositional culture, moreover, gangs thrived like never before because subcultural codes intensified and even perverted prior existing class codes [61]. Wacquant [66,68,69] extends this underclass thesis to argue that in the War on Drugs era, the "ghetto" became the "hyperghetto". The ghetto was a product of wider social repression against black populations, yet retained some vibrancy and class diversity. The hyperghetto was an urban prison for the ethnically poor, now completely isolated from mainstream cultural and institutional life. This isolation was solidified through mass incarceration, related felon disenfranchisement, and community and family disruption and destruction [31]. For example, the administration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan early on began to prioritize the War on Drugs and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 increased penalties for crack cocaine possession and usage, including

a mandatory minimum sentence of five years without parole for possession of five grams of crack cocaine (or 500 g of powder cocaine); thus ensuring minority youth steadily and systematically moved from the streets to jail (N.B., this 100-to-1 sentencing disparity was reduced to 18-to-1 by the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010).

In a modern consumerist society that evaluates everyone and everything by their commodity value, the occupants of the hyperghetto were essentially worthless [70]. The void left by the collapse of the legitimate market, however, was filled by the illegitimate market [56]. Distribution of the only commodity which retained any real economic value allowed dealers to enter the workforce "in search of respect" [63]. Poor residential areas became shop floors for illicit drug distribution and as new illegal enterprises grew so did the complexity of those criminals and criminal organizations involved in them. Retaining both turf and numbers meant that street gangs already possessed the capacity to be successful distribution networks for drug sales. This process saw a growing number of street gangs begin to engage in drug dealing practices. Thus, gang organization was effectively aided by wider economic factors both within and without the United States.

5. Implications for Gangs and Gang Responses

The crack cocaine economy provided a "goal orientation" for gangs, a defining feature of formal organization [71], and by the end of the Twentieth Century, researchers were observing more "structured" and "entrepreneurial" gangs in large U.S. cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York [55,60,72–78]. The evolution of street-level drug markets and with them, the evolution of the gang itself (e.g., [79,80]) rapidly transformed the urban landscape. Gangs were no longer social or "play groups," with little permanence or stability [13] (p. 30). Assisted in part by the societal reaction to drugs, gangs became an institutionalized feature of some poverty communities. The charged atmosphere of the U.S. penitentiary system, for example, served to "focus and galvanize the anger and frustrations of the many captives in the war on drugs" [57] (p. 49). As gang members were later released from prison and returned to their communities, they brought entrenched gang ideology and practices with them, laying the foundation for an intergenerational transmission of gang membership [23].

Further, Roth [81] argues it is prohibition against drugs, not drugs per se, that causes the vast majority of drug-related violent crime. When alcohol was prohibited in the 1920s, "alcohol dealers settled their differences with firearms; just as cocaine dealers do today" [82] (p. 150). The illegality of drugs creates a situation where at any point in the drug supply chain, disputes between buyers and sellers over price, quality, and quantity, and disputes between sellers over customer base and product availability, cannot be resolved by a legal third party, but rather through force and the threat of force [81]. This incentivizes dealers to "create and sustain a reputation for being at least as tough and at least as well-armed as their competitors" [83] (p. 371).

The fact that drug dealers are armed and dangerous forces law enforcement to develop new and aggressive tactics for policing the drug market. Drug dealing typically is a crime with a cooperating witness or victim (because both buyer and seller mutually seek one another out), thus drug enforcement is forced to rely on "unusually intrusive investigative techniques" predicated on low "reasonable suspicion" standards of evidence [82] (p. 155). Aggressive profiling and stop and frisk tactics, in turn, contribute to an environment of distrust between high-crime neighborhoods and law enforcement. This strain between the police and public can also be criminogenic, "since police work relies heavily on cooperation with the public" [83] (p. 373). The absence of formal protections for black people, starting with Slavery and Jim Crow and culminating in an abundance of unsolved black homicides, for example, has meant that in some urban communities, the gang functions as its own police force [84].

6. Concluding Thoughts

The importation of cocaine into the U.S. was determined by not just U.S. policy but also unequal economic relationships and larger market forces [49]. Undoubtedly there is an evident demand for cocaine in the U.S. [42]. By making a product affordable, pleasurable, and readily available, the

demand will remain despite invariable ebbs and flows and market fluctuations. Yet as discussed, alongside consumer demand, the right conditions must be evident in order to facilitate maximum product production and distribution. In the case of cocaine, it was not just the raw ingredients which were needed but rather, because of its illegality, there had to be certain pre-existing social conditions (i.e., a weak economy, lack of social control mechanisms, and strong distribution outlets). While such conditions were clearly present in supplier regions where the product was produced (i.e., grown, stocked, and readied for transport) like Bolivia, Colombia, and later Mexico, ironically, those destinations designed as sale points—geared for large scale public transactions—require similar social conditions to facilitate the sale (i.e., socially disorganized communities, weak social control mechanisms, and a lack of legitimate economy). Such pre-existing conditions were found in the U.S. slums, which became the shop floors (destination) for drug dealing street gangs (outlets), who in turn were connected to Cartels by famed middle-men like Oscar Danilo Blandon and "Freeway" Rick Ross (see [20,85]).

Decker and Chapman [86] note that while drug distribution is typically presented in a harmonious manner by law enforcement, more often than not drug smuggling occurs in a series of networks which are largely disconnected from one another. Similarly, often such criminal networks are presented as being facilitated by ethnic migration, yet such assumptions are arguably continued designations from debunked "alien conspiracy" theories of organized crime [87]. The irony remains that while the War on Drugs strategy used a mix of deterrence and containment to regulate and control conditions beyond U.S. borders, including global market forces, consecutive U.S. administrations neglected the conditions conducive to a drug economy within their own borders—structural inequality, racial prejudice, and urban deprivation and unrest on home soil. As Sutherland [88] states, criminal probability is alleviated or non-existent when those factual correlations to crime are not present. The end result was a drug–gang nexus and with it, the need to extend drug control into crime control. Hence, the "criminal gang" was born.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.M.; Writing—original draft, R.M.; Writing—review & editing, G.R. and J.D.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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