

ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO URBAN JUVENILE GANGS: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

Erifyli Bakirli¹

ABSTRACT

Juvenile delinquency and gang crime have been a focus of the social sciences for more than a century. At the beginning of the 20th century in Chicago, street gangs were studied as a socio-cultural phenomenon in urban development. Present literature study gives emphasis on the sociological aspects of juvenile gangs and the impact of urban environment to youth criminal behavior and gang affiliation. Paper begins with a brief historical review on ecological research of crime and delinquency. We discuss, afterwards, about youth gangs as forms of deviant subcultures and their relevance to the contemporary metropolis and urban lifestyle. Finally, the main characteristics of urban youth gangs are presented, as far as racial origins, location, structure, cohesiveness, membership composition and behavioral patterns, are concerned.

Keywords: juvenile street-gang, urbanization, deviant subculture, gang delinquency, ecological approaches

¹ PhD in Criminology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens-Greece, erifylibakirli@yahoo.gr.

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency and gang crime have been a focus of the social sciences for more than a century (Esbensen & Maxson, 2012). However, the term “youth gang” is ambivalent. Not every youth group that call themselves a gang would also count as a gang in scientific terms. Varying definitions of youth gangs are the basic reason for divergent estimates of the magnitude of the “gang problem” (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 8). Researchers who specialize in studies of youth gangs, such as the Eurogang Network, have agreed on the following nominal definition for scientific purposes: “A street gang (or a troublesome youth group²) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity” (Klein et al., 2006: 418 ; Weerman et al., 2009: 20 ; Stummvoll, 2021: 5)³.

Youth crime is multi-faceted by its nature, both in its causes and effects. Youth gangs that commit crimes often include young people with a variety of social problems associated with poor schooling, migration background, low socio-economic status and living in deprived neighborhoods. Neither surveys nor official reporting systems demonstrate concisely the complexity and dynamics of gang realities and the fluid nature of gang activities and membership (Hughes, 2005: 102-103 ; Stummvoll, 2021: 7).

At the beginning of the 20th century in Chicago, street gangs were studied as a socio-cultural phenomenon in urban development. After the 2nd World War, the emphasis shifted to the critical study of deviance and social control, as juveniles were regarded as victims of social inequalities and (racial) discrimination. At the last turn of the centuries, the criminological focus shifted again to study risk factors in order to develop countermeasures against delinquency and violence caused by youth gangs (Stummvoll,

² Youth gangs can also be described alternatively as “troublesome youth groups”, see Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 8 ; Klein et al., 2006: 414.

³ The clarifications in Eurogang Network -an international collective of gang researchers- materials further add that a gang is (1) a group (three or more individuals), (2) that has existed for at least three months, (3) that hangs out in public places, (4) with members predominantly in their teens and early twenties, (5) engages in criminal or delinquent activity (not just bothersome behavior) and (6) for which illegal activity is normal or accepted behavior in the group, see Medina et al., 2013. Many European countries are confronted lately with an aggravated problem of gang crime and increasing street violence, see Klein et al., 2006: 433.

2021: 5). Present literature study gives emphasis on the sociological aspects of juvenile delinquency and the impact of urban environment (Duncan & Raudenbush, 1999: 30)⁴ to youth criminal behavior and gang affiliation. Let us first present a brief historical review on ecological research of crime and delinquency.

Ecological approaches to juvenile delinquency

Environmental impact to delinquent behavior was first examined in 19th century (Burke, 2002: 192), where the Belgian mathematician Quételet and the French lawyer Guerry, founders of the prominent *Franco-Belgian Cartographic School* (Lanier, 1998: 183), shifted scientific interest from bio-psychological theoretical principles (prevalent until then) to a sociological-oriented approach (still deterministic) (Muncie, 1999: 102). Later on, during the first decades of 20th century *Chicago School of Sociology* makes its appearance and American urban sociologists Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1925) enunciate the “*Five Concentric Zone Model*” through their article collection “*The City*”⁵. According to their ecological explanations, living conditions of the human beings resemble those of plants and animals (Chaidou, 1996: 133) and every human society must have adequate “*natural zones*” in order for the humans to develop properly (Fousteris, 1996: 78).

At the same time, American sociologist Thrasher (1927/1947) in his pioneer book “*The gang. A study of 1.313 gangs in Chicago*”, conducted a long-term ethnographic study on street gangs in the 1920s in the city of Chicago. Thrasher spent eight years, studying 1.313 different youth groups across the city of Chicago and found that the gang emerged out of a natural playgroup of children (“gangland”) who were united in defense and shared the struggle for privileges and territorial sovereignty in the streets of Chicago. Huge industrial plots and shopping malls characterized this area. Thrasher considered crime and delinquency as a by-product of population density, overcrowded urban streets (slums) and poverty (Cullen, 1984: 105 ; Stummvoll, 2021: 10).

⁴ By the compound term “*environment*” it is described the *natural, built and social* environment as well. See in detail, Zarafonitou, 1996: 11-12.

⁵ The three basic articles are: “*The city: Suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the urban environment*” written by Park, “*The growth of the city: An introduction to a research project*” written by Burgess and “*The ecological approach to the study of human community*” written by McKenzie.

Afterwards, American sociologists Shaw & McKay (1942) published their seminal research “*Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*”, which lasted from 1900 till 1933⁶ in a sample of 60.000 delinquent juveniles, aged 10-16 years old (Shaw & McKay, 1972: 3). The results confirmed the “*Five Concentric Zone Model*” hypothesis that the physical deterioration of residential areas accompanied by social disorganization, is greatest in a central zone in the business district, intermediate in a middle zone, and lowest in the other zones, and that there is a progressive decline in the incidence of delinquency from the innermost zone, where it is most concentrated, to the peripheral areas (Cullen, 1984: 110).

Ecological approach to crime and delinquency was further examined by a number of researches in the ‘50s (Lander, 1954 ; Morris, 1958 ; Schmid, 1960, etc.), in the ‘70s with the significant contributions of *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design Programs* (Jeffery, 1971), “*personal defensible space*” (Newman, 1972), and “*criminal journey*” (Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976) and in the ‘80s and ‘90s with the rise of “*economic theories of crime*” such as “*routine activities theories*” (Cohen & Felson, 1979) and *situational crime prevention* programs (Clarke, 1995) in Europe and the US (see Farrington, 1996: 126).

The main contribution of such ecological interpretations to causes of crime and delinquency was the shift of emphasis from internal personality traits or offenders’ “*violent pathology*” to the external social environment or “*social pathology*” of the most impoverished urban areas. Juvenile delinquency, in the form of gang crime, has continuing relevance in the contemporary metropolis and correlates with urban lifestyle, a matter we now turn on.

The impact of urbanization to juvenile delinquent gangs

Shaw & McKay (1972: 184) used “*Social Disorganization Theory*” in order to explain the geographical distribution of criminality. According to them, as organized is

⁶ Their research was conducted in the following periods: 1900-1906, 1917-1923 and 1927-1933. See Bursik & Webb, 1982: 28.

considered to be a society with mutual social cohesion and consent among its members, as far as approved behavioral patterns are concerned. On the contrary, social disorganization is described as the weakness of community to transfer mutual values and morals to its members and thus, fails to actively preserve social control of crime (Bursik, 1988: 521 ; Sampson & Groves, 1989: 777). Social disorganization is apparent then, when social values collide with social wishes and thus society becomes unable to solve its problems by its own (Young, 1963, as quoted in Lambropoulou, 2009: 261)⁷. Authors agree that some of the factors that precipitate social disorganization in a community is residents' economic status (lower the status, higher the delinquency), population composition (high delinquency areas concentrate high number of foreign immigrants) and population mobility (mass settlement of newcomers foreign immigrants into the city centers forged indigenous populations to move to outer, less deprived areas) (see Rattner & McKie, 1990: 156 ; Bottoms & Wiles, 1992: 14 ; Zarafonitou, 1995: 147 ; Chaidou, 1996: 138-140 ; Sampson, 1997: 33-34 ; Ouimet, 2000: 138-139 ; Shaw & McKay, 2002: 69-73).

Correlation between city life and gang formation becomes apparent for Shaw & McKay (1972: 174-175), since communities with no or little social cohesion demonstrate weakened (informal) social control to juveniles (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003: 376). Antisocial behavior becomes a “normal” phenomenon in society, an ordinary consequence of poor living conditions, and anything but pathological (Stummvoll, 2021: 11). Delinquency is then described as a feature of locality in the city and as a way of life passed from generation to generation, a matter of *cultural transmission* (Frazier, 1976: 12-13 ; Muncie, 1999: 103).

Most of the urban sociology scholars ascertain a causal relationship between *urbanism* (the phenomenon of population concentration into the cities) and *urbanity* (behavior of the citizens that live into the cities) (Tittle & Grasmick, 2001: 313, 315-316), pointing that the main characteristics of the urban lifestyle are: *anonymity, tolerance, alienation, social/communal bonds* (lack of) and *deviant behavior* (Fischer, 1973: 311 ; Tittle, 1989: 276-280 ; Tittle & Stafford, 1992: 732-734 ; Ingram, 1993: 198-199). The basic

⁷ By social control is meant the ability of the society to be self-regulated on the basis of common principles and values, Lambropoulou, 1994: 19.

theories that support the impact of city's structural features in human behavior (even under different spectrums) are: the *classical or determinist theory* (cities have a specific urban culture), the *compositional-systemic perspective* (cities attract people with particular demographic and cultural traits), and the *subcultural theory* (cities do have a specific urban culture and favor the creation of strong bonds among people with certain demographic and cultural traits). Juvenile gangs are, thus, seen as deviant subcultures that emerge from the urban "*critical mass*" (Tittle, 1989: 270-271 ; Tittle & Stafford, 1992: 725-728 ; Tittle & Grasmick, 2001: 316).

Most of the empirical researches ascertain correlations between deviant behavior and environmental degradation of the metropolitan centers (Zarafonitou, 1995: 152), since the last ones demonstrate:

-Unequal distribution of land use: an equal distribution of different land zones (such as natural, residence, industrial, commercial zones) guarantees the existence of adequate common spaces (such as parks, school buildings, etc.), something that enhances environmental quality. On the contrary, degraded areas are characterized by intense industrial and commercial land use, environmental pollution, high percentages of public housing and lack of open public spaces (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1984: 319, 322 ; Wikstrom, 1998: 282-283). According to "*Environmental Psychology*" (Canter, 1988) environmental degradation may affect human behavior by encouraging psychological disorders associated to violence and aggressiveness (Georgiou, 1996: 38 ; Wikstrom, 1998: 283).

-High population density: modern cities are densely populated and thus citizens' personal needs can't be properly met. Overcrowding may affect negatively individual psychology and result in social and psychological disorganization, mental disorders, aggressiveness, antisocial behavior, etc. (Nikolaidou, 1993: 229-230).

-Modern architectural and urban planning: high rise buildings and huge residential complexes (that prevail after the 2nd World War) undermine the sense of community and boost alienation and social hostility (Georgiou, 1996: 42-43). The closer natural proximity of the people living into the cities, the more social and emotional distance, anonymity and alienation they experience (Bookchin, 1996: 116).

-Race and cultural heterogeneity: cities become more and more ethnic and culturally heterogeneous (Fischer, 1995: 555), since the installation of a large number of immigrants in their inner and especially to the most impoverished areas. Inner cities

gather a lot of ethnic subcultures (Fischer, 1975: 1330-1333), something that has been proved to be a risk factor for future deviant behavior, due to economic deprivation and lack of social solidarity among people of different ethnic origin.

We now turn our focus on the subcultural character of juvenile gangs.

Juvenile gang as a form of deviant subculture

“Everybody was wild, and I wanted to be with the wild crowd, because I liked it. I didn’t want to be a nerd, or nothing like that. I figured it was wise, so being wild became a habit. I used to get into trouble and do atrocities” (Bourgois, 1995)

Juvenile gangs are subcultural in character. But what do we mean by the term subculture? In order to define it we’ll try to explain first what culture is. The term *culture* describes “*learned behavior that has been socially acquired*”. Thus, culture tends to unify people in societies, since it provides socially learned solutions to problems. Culture is a dynamic process and people become both actors and culture generators. Culture also embodies contrasts and contradictions. Subculture is such a contradiction (Downes, 1966: 3, 6 ; Brake, 1985: 2).

Most of the subculture scholars agree that subculture is seen as a solution to problems that dominant culture doesn’t have an outlet. According to Downes (1966: 9) subcultures may be sorted in: a) those created *outside* the limits of the dominant culture (see for example ethnic minority subcultures), b) those created inside dominant culture as a *positive* outlet to different social needs (see age or professional subcultures), and finally, c) those created inside dominant culture as a *negative* alternative to different social needs (see juvenile gangs).

The concept of deviant subculture as a reaction to problems of the mainstream culture has been best expressed by Cohen, Miller and Cloward & Ohlin. Cohen (1955) apparently affected by Merton’s *Anomie theory* (Hobbs, 1997: 805 ; Muncie, 1999: 108), argued in “*Delinquent boys. The culture of the gang*”, that structural and institutionalised inequality brought on an experience of collective strain, which then

induced similarly excluded individuals to establish “group standards” in opposition to mainstream values in society (Zarafonitou, 1995: 121 ; Chaidou, 1996: 163, 166 ; Stummvoll, 2021: 11). Youth’s gang involvement is seen as the outcome thereby of “*status frustration*” (Stummvoll, 2021: 11). Miller (1975), on the contrary, supports that working class’ subculture doesn’t reflect negative reaction to middle-class values. Gang is seen as a self-existent cultural system, whose focal concerns favor deviant than conformist behavior (Burke, 2002: 114, 177-178). Despite their obvious distinctions, both theoretical explanations of juvenile delinquency by Cohen and Miller put the emphasis on class struggle (Chaidou, 1996: 184).

Through their “*differential opportunity theory*” Cloward & Ohlin (1960: 20) put emphasis on the disparity between the “*cultural goal*” of economic success and the unequal distribution of “*legitimate means*” of attaining this goal. Thus, gang membership provides them with a substitute social status. According to authors deviant subculture is categorized as: a) “*conflict subculture*” (gang related violence), b) “*criminal subculture*” (criminal activity for the sake of wealth and social prestige) and c) “*retreatist subculture*” (use of drugs as the main motive) (Zarafonitou, 1995: 122 ; Hobbs, 1997: 806). Finally, it is worth mentioning the astonishing study of Wolfgang & Ferracuti (1995/2002) “*Subculture of violence*” about violent behavioral patterns and their racial origin. According to them, subculture is a lifestyle for groups with certain racial origin that is passed down from generation to generation and violence becomes a legalized way of solving the conflicts (Zarafonitou, 1995: 125-126).

In summary, at the macro-social level of explanation, gangs have been attributed to diverse empirical contexts: social disorganization and a social order unique to slums (see Thrasher, 1927), opposition to middle-class culture (see Cohen, 1955), lower-class culture (see Miller, 1975), opportunities associated with social structures (see Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and multiple racial marginalities (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1995). The subcultural theories developed above tried to explain juvenile delinquency and juvenile gangs, as forms of deviant subcultures.

Let us now examine some of the main characteristics of urban youth gangs.

Some features of juvenile street-gangs

Though it is difficult to find a definition that best describes gangs and gang membership (see Ball & Curry, 1995), we may discern some of gangs' common characteristics and their distinction with other *youth delinquent groups* (Kourakis et al., 2003: 2218). The term *juvenile gang* refers to a group of young people, that comes together in order to commit deviant or criminal acts, as has already been mentioned initially. This definition implies that crime committed by members of a youth gang is not an isolated outbreak of violence, but a frequent occurrence deeply entrenched in social structures. It is worth mentioning that youth subcultural groups showing no deviant behavior, can't be conceived as gangs. Conversely, deviant behavior or crime commission, are not solely enough for the youth group to be labeled as a gang. We recognize the potentially inclusive effect that gangs can have on individuals in terms of solid membership bonds, positive in-group feelings, protection, social cohesion, collective conscience, and solidarity (Stummvoll, 2021: 7, 10). As far as organizational structure is concerned, it is essential for the gang to have clear role expectations, coordinated action, stable leadership and hierarchy (even loose) (Manoudaki, 1998: 1144), compared to other *delinquent peer associations* (see Curry & Spergel, 1988: 382 ; Curry & Spergel, 1992: 274 ; Pyrooz et al., 2012: 86 ; Dong & Krohn, 2016, as quoted in Walters, 2019: 1045).

Taking these under consideration, we'll try to discern some basic gang features according to relevant field research. So juvenile street-oriented gangs:

-have primarily an adolescent or early adult character, since they are composed mainly by young boys aged 10-20 years old (Klein, 1998: 113 ; Klein et al., 2006: 420). Participation of adults may be possible but not usual (Manoudaki, 1998: 1144). Older ages are found in particular gang types such as Traditional and Neo-Traditional gangs (see below gang typology of Klein & Maxson, 1996, 2006). Most European gangs are predominantly male (Klein et al., 2006: 421). Female youth are shown to be relatively underrepresented in gangs and gang activity. Female members of mixed-gender gangs tend to report only limited peer pressure to participate in criminal activities and frequently allude to alternative means of achieving status, such as through their relationships with high-ranking male members. Relative research has showed that gang-associated girls act as small auxiliary units of male gangs (Klein, 1998: 115 ; Hughes, 2005: 100, 105 ; Aldridge & Medina-Ariza, 2008: 20). Autonomous female

gangs is a rising phenomenon still scarce, but we see lately a lot of male gangs to have female subgroups and specific roles for girls (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 24),

-operate in urban environments and city centers, which favor economic deprivation, disorder/incivilities and poor neighborhood integration (Stummvoll, 2021: 12). Empirical field research ascertains that juvenile gangs make their appearance in large cities or metropolitan areas of 200.000 inhabitants and more (see Miller, 1982, as quoted in Howell, 1994: 498, 504 ; Howell, 1995: 262-266 ; Walters, 2019: 1044). Community is the domain examined most frequently in regard to both the emergence of gangs and the factors associated with joining gangs. Numerous studies indicate that poverty, unemployment and social disorganization contribute to the presence of gangs (Hagedorn, 1991 ; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 12 ; Auyong et al., 2018: 1713). There is little disagreement that gangs are more prominent in urban areas and that they are more likely to emerge in economically distressed neighborhoods. Nonetheless, several youth surveys have revealed the emergence of juvenile gangs in small towns and rural areas (see for example Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001), but to a much lesser extent (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 12),

-are involved in a variety of illegal activities (ranging from minor to more serious offenses) (Walters, 2019: 1044) except *specialty gangs* (which are occupied with certain criminal activities such as drug distribution). Compared to non-gang incidents, gang incidents are more visible, more violent, more likely to involve a weapon, more likely to involve strangers, and more likely to involve fear of retaliation (Hughes 2005: 99-100 ; Klein et al., 2006: 429). Nevertheless, youth groups who commit crime cause significant problems in urban areas, either by fighting each other or by intimidating and threatening the general population. Gun violence, knife crimes, robberies, serious physical injuries, street fights and property damage in public spaces, provoke major fears, and not exclusively into deprived neighborhoods (Howell, 1994: 499-500 ; Zimring, 1998: 89 ; Stummvoll, 2021: 5). Juvenile gangs become violent mostly with other rival gangs and other deviant subcultures in general (Klein, 1998: 113,117) mainly for reasons of territory sovereignty and honor defense (Howell, 1995: 268 ; Adamson, 1998: 57-84 ; Klein et al., 2006: 414, 433). There is considerable evidence, though, that youth gang will avoid delinquent and violent behaviors when acceptable alternatives are available and unlikely to call their honor into question (Hughes 2005: 106-107),

-have discernible structural and organizational characteristics. Klein & Maxson (1996, 2006) have categorized gangs in five types as: Traditional, Neo-Traditional, Compressed, Collective and Specialty (Klein et al., 2006: 419), each of them has its own racial origins, location, diffusion, duration, structure, cohesiveness, membership composition and behavioral patterns (including criminal behavior). A lot of American gangs, for example, tend to have more characteristics associated with more formal or organized gangs, such as colors or symbols, some type of initiation rites, established leaders, specific rules or codes, regular meetings, etc. (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 23 ; Aldridge & Medina-Ariza, 2008: 17)⁸,

-demonstrate high peer pressure. Gang members' involvement is attributed to peer factors, such as having gang-involved friends and family members or a desire for protection, a sense of belonging, status preservation, and/or support in coping with boredom and the exigencies of growing up under harsh social and economic circumstances (Hughes, 2005: 101). Especially across Europe, gang banding is closely tied to collective peer effect, shaping the thinking of youthful gang members and facilitating their future involvement in delinquency and crime (Haymoz et al., 2014: 675 ; Walters, 2019: 1059). In any case, peers' criminogenic influence is strong, so as to say that exposure, attachment, association and commitment to delinquent peers is one of the strongest predictors of gang membership (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 11-12 ; Walters, 2019: 1056, 1059)⁹,

-contribute to delinquent behavior either by transmitting deviant norms and moral attitudes through social learning processes that take place among gang members (the *social facilitation model*) or by recruiting members who already are delinquent, or at least have a high propensity for delinquency, before joining the gang (the *selection model*) (see in detail Pedersen, 2018). There is a third model based on combination of

⁸ The predominant form of gang in both Europe and the USA is the Compressed gang in the Maxson-Klein typology. It is predominantly an adolescent group of a few years' duration, ranging in size usually from 10 to 50 members. Its criminal behavior pattern is versatile. Next most common in Europe are Specialty gangs, smaller in size but older in average age with a predominantly narrow criminal focus (included would be skinheads and groups principally involved in robberies, assaults or drug distribution). Traditional or Neo-traditional gangs, which are quite common in the USA, but yet seldom reported in Europe, are large (more of 50 members), multigenerational groups with denotable subgroups based on age or residence. They tend to be strongly territorial and versatile in crime patterns, Klein et al., 2006: 420.

⁹ Chui & Khatani (2018: 2542) suggest that there needs to be a closer examination of the relative influence of not just the in-group organizational and peer dimensions, but also of the out-group affiliations (such as adult organized crime groups) to youth gang members on an individual level of analysis.

the first two, and the underlying assumption is that social facilitation and selection processes may work together in forming the strong association between gang membership and antisocial behavior (the *enhancement model*) (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993: 565-589 ; Thornberry et al., 1993: 55-87 ; Howell, 1994: 502 ; Chaidou, 1996: 162 ; Thornberry, 1998: 164-165 ; Battin et al., 1998: 93-111 ; Bendixen et al., 2006: 86). Juvenile delinquency is considered to be group-oriented (Erickson & Jensen, 1977 ; Zimring, 1998: 29 ; Katz, 2000: 183) and the entrance to juvenile gangs leads almost with certainty to criminality. The case seems to be the same with gang-related girls, who commit more crime than girls not involved in gangs, yet are less likely to commit crime than boys in a gang (Auyong et al. 2018: 1712),

-tend to be ethnic heterogeneous. Although gangs coalesce around ethnicity (see Black, Hispanic or Asian gangs for example) (Grund & Densley, 2012: 388), a lot of studies indicate that there are few gangs that share a single ethnic identity lately. Ethnic heterogeneity has proven to be an important factor within community contexts and it relates to the activity and structure of gangs. For many scholars modern “*hybrid*” gangs are increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic composition, not least because continuous immigration has facilitated ethnic mixing (Aldridge & Medina-Ariza, 2008: 18). Alternatively, the ethnic composition of gangs may merely represent an extension of the social and economic characteristics of the larger community; that is, gangs “*tend to reflect the neighborhoods in which young people live*” (Stevens et al., 2010: 10, as quoted in Grund & Densley, 2012: 390). So it is rather social marginality, not specific ethnicity or race, which ties gang membership together (Klein et al., 2006: 421).

In sum, it seems that most of the street gangs are quite varied along important structural lines, possibly excepting their principally male composition. Moreover, the group processes that distinguish gangs from other youth groups seem directly related to higher levels of delinquency, generally, and to higher levels of violence in particular, so as to say that there is a “*gang effect*” on violent behavior. Compared with non-members, gang members have substantially higher rates of violence as the dominant form of conduct, engage in more serious forms of violence and are more apt to use weapons. Nevertheless, severity and lethality of youth violence of gang members are, generally speaking, lower in European countries than in the United States (Klein et al., 2006: 421, 428, 433-434).

Conclusion

Although youth gangs have traditionally been viewed as an American phenomenon¹⁰, the past decades have witnessed the emergence of considerable “gang-like” behavior in Europe, Australia, South and Central America, Africa and Asia (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 6). There are, still, major controversies over these structures in terms of ethnicity, rivalry, diffusion, socio-economic strain, etc. (Stummvoll, 2021: 10). These gang differences suggest that structural and cultural features of gang life are not universal and may vary across nations (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 27). Nonetheless, and despite Thrasher’s (1927: 5) observation that “no two gangs are just alike”, juvenile gangs are portrayed to be an urban phenomenon that makes its appearance under similar social and environmental conditions and provokes similar social reactions.

The traditional image of urban youth gangs that is characterized by social disorganization and economic marginalization, has renewed interest in the social disorganization perspective advanced by Thrasher (1927) and Shaw and McKay (1942), as exposed above. Gang membership is related to specific sociodemographic characteristics, since gang members experience the added burden of having marginal social identities. These juveniles look for identity and stability in the gang and gang subculture. Social structural conditions alone, however, cannot account for the presence of gangs, since inner-city youths live in areas where social controls have weakened and opportunities for success in legitimate activities are limited, but participation in gangs is selective and most youths are hindered by joining gang life (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005: 12-13).

In life-course criminology it is argued that criminal careers are the result of an accumulation of a number of risk factors, including individual, psychological, social and economic factors (Stummvoll, 2021: 12). There is a consensus that gang risk is cumulative and broad, such that the more risks apparent in different domains of the young person’s life, the more likely she/he is to participate in a street gang (Haymoz et

¹⁰ It is estimated that there are approximately 850.000 gang members across the United States, constituting more than 30.000 gangs (National Gang Center, 2012, as quoted in Lee & Bubolz, 2019: 64). More recent estimations confirm that there are over one million juvenile gang members in the United States (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015, as quoted in Walters, 2019: 1044).

al., 2014: 661). Pathways towards prevention that strengthens social ties should present some arguments for a positive change, particularly derived from the concepts of “drift”, “social bonding” with conventional networks and “turning points” in the life course of young people, which seem to be neither predetermined, nor culturally inherited. But these concepts are to be discussed in another paper, in order to tackle youth gang delinquency and inform policy makers and youth workers in designing suitable future interventions (Stummvoll, 2021: 6).

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