

Youth Gangs

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[Youth gangs](#) are self-identified, organized groups of adolescents, banded together under common interests and a common leader in activities that typically are regarded as menacing to society or illegal. Gangs, or their prototypes, have existed for hundreds of years in a number of cultures, however many scholars locate the emergence of the modern youth gang in the nineteenth century, during the shift from agrarian to industrial society. Most youth gangs arise among the urban poor, though not always. Although gangs participate in unlawful activities associated with controlling a territory or illegal enterprise, most of their pursuits remain purely social and within the law.

Gangs and youth groups have existed since at least the Middle Ages. Accounts from England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries describe criminal gangs that robbed, extorted, and raped. In France, England, and Germany, medieval juvenile groups known as *abbeyes of misrule* participated in violent sports and fights against rival groups in honor of the abbeyes from which they were recruited. Other youth groups rioted and intimidated deviant villagers, and were sanctioned by adults for enforcing the social order. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English gangs wore colored ribbons to mark their allegiances, battled rivals, and terrorized communities. In the American colonies, people complained about troublesome groups who caroused, fought, and stole, as well.

Although these earlier prototypical gangs possessed characteristics associated with the modern youth gang, quintessential urban street gangs only emerged in the nineteenth century. In the United States, the social and economic pressures associated with rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration gave rise to organized criminal gangs that thrived under these conditions. Gangs like the "Pug Uglies" and the "Dead Rabbits" conducted illegal activities in slums and recruited youths and adults. They were linked with the criminal underworld, saloons, and political machines. As new immigrants arrived and ethnic conflicts increased in the late 1800s, ethnic youth gangs battling for turf and status became more prevalent.

Urban reformers interpreted the gang phenomena as part of the depravity and degradation of city life. Alarmed by the tenacity and success of some of these organizations, they began to study the causes of gangs. Significantly, researchers focused on the role of juvenile DELINQUENCY in the development of adult criminal gangs. Partly as a result of these studies, many reformers throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted child welfare services and

education as a means of stemming gang activity and reestablishing social order.

Frederic M. Thrasher's work *The Gang* (1927) epitomized this new trend in the study of gangs. Thrasher located the roots of criminal groups not only in the miserable living conditions and economic disadvantages of the poor, but also in adolescent development. He proposed that gangs were a normal adaptation to slums and an extension of natural adolescent bonding. Young gang members entered into adult organizations only when social conditions remained inadequate and social mobility was unattainable.

Youth gangs received heightened attention during World War II. In Europe, the disastrous upheaval of war caused a significant rise in delinquency. Acting out of necessity, juvenile gangs participated in the black market, prostitution, and theft. In the United States, the increase in youth gang activity was as much a product of Americans' new awareness of the problem as it was of true increases in numbers. Public officials and the press blamed wartime conditions, like disruptions in family life, for contributing to [juvenile delinquency](#). At the same time, people became concerned with ethnic youth subcultures and fads, like the zoot-suit fashion. The style, and its connection to a series of race riots in 1943, created a situation in which minority youths began to band together into ethnic gangs for protection, and which also crystallized the public's conception of youth gang violence.

In the 1950s gangs were characterized by their ethnic and racial affiliations, their control of territory, and their greater use of violence against rivals. Law enforcement and social services targeted gangs for research, surveillance, and interventions. However, by the mid-1960s, adolescent gang activities slowed. Gang intervention programs and public policy did much to disrupt gangs. Scholars also suggest that political involvement in civil rights issues and the anti-war movement drew many youths away from gang participation, or redirected gang activities into militant groups like the Black Panthers.

Youth gangs resurfaced in the 1970s in response to the economic downturn in inner cities and to the growing drug culture. A number of returning veterans from Vietnam reorganized gangs and provided new leadership and experience. Though youth gangs actually fought against the prevailing drug culture at first, many juvenile gangs increasingly turned to drug trafficking for profit. By the 1980s, gangs were involved in more predatory crimes, and battled for control of illegal markets as well as turf. Gang activity was marked by brutal violence as gang members began to carry and use guns. Today, modern juvenile gangs continue to be a problem around the world.