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Homicidal Events Among Mexican American Street Gangs:

A Situational Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines the complexity of street gang homicides and focuses on situational factors that lead to gang members' susceptibility to this violent behavior within the context of a disadvantaged minority community. This study is based on an analysis of 28 homicides involving Mexican American gang members. The absence of immigrant youth involvement in these types of violent crimes is discussed. Findings demonstrate how locally embedded social processes associated with specific gang types, ecology, drugs, circumstances, and motives unfold into homicidal events. These findings may contribute to the development of street-based social programs focused on gang mediation, dispute resolution, and crisis intervention.

Keywords

Mexican Americans; youth gangs; homicide; drugs

Concerns have emerged about the association of United States (U.S.) Latinos and crime, especially because of the increased presence of street gangs among this population. However, many crime indicators for Latinos, including homicide, are often lower than for other socioeconomically comparable U.S. groups (Martinez, 2002; Sampson, 2008). This is often explained by the large proportion of immigrants compared with native-born counterparts that make-up the total Latino population, especially in urban areas. However, subgroups of Latinos, such as nonimmigrant street-oriented youth, may be more susceptible to cultural value systems associated with homicide and other violent and antisocial behaviors (Umemoto, 2006). U.S. persons of Mexican origin may be more vulnerable to this process, given their persistent racialized status, than are other Latino groups (Telles & Ortiz, 2008). This article explores these interactions by examining quantitatively and qualitatively 28 homicides involving Mexican American gang members in a southwestern city.

As importantly, this article begins to delineate the complexity of homicide among Latinos by demonstrating how structural, subcultural, and situational factors differentially affect nonimmigrants and immigrants. Sampson and colleagues (2008) found that homicides were lower in U.S. urban areas with a high proportion of Mexican and other Latino immigrants. These studies argue that structural characteristics (poverty, unemployment, homeownership, etc.) in neighborhoods where immigrants live are distinct from those of African Americans and others. Expanding on this idea, Martinez (2002) argued that Latino homicide rates in particular are suppressed by a convergence of relative deprivation and structural conditions. However, even when controlling for neighborhood and other individual and family factors, immigrants in Chicago were 45% less likely to commit violence than were third-generation Latinos (Sampson, 2008). We hypothesize that among segments of United States born

Latinos who live in structurally disorganized communities, the etiology of homicide events may be more socially multifaceted.

The position of this study is that violence is often misunderstood because it is a highly interactive behavior that is often shaped by issues of reflexivity, such as the observer's own cultural and class biases (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994). One of the unresolved issues in the area of violence is understanding the pivotal role of situational-level processes in the instigation of the violent act itself. Therefore, this study examines these processes by focusing on the violent episodes themselves, as well as on the nature of the gangs, their spatial ecology, and the social context in which they are embedded in the Mexican American population. As importantly, it explores within these homicidal situations victim-offender relations and the role of substance use and weapons in these homicides. Moreover, the study provides data, absent in many studies, on the meanings assigned to the language, behaviors, and symbols within the life context of individuals in these situations. This approach requires an understanding of individuals' own perception and subjective apprehensions. By examining the context and dynamics of these specific events, this analysis will expand our knowledge of criminal homicides generally and those related to youth gangs specifically.

Latino Homicides: Multilevel Perspectives

During the past decade, a great deal of national attention has focused on Latino adolescents and young adults associated with street gangs and violence. Evidence indicates that Latino youth street gangs have proliferated in the United States and have spread across the country in large and small cities and in suburban and rural areas. These Latinos often reside in neighborhoods characterized by unemployment, poverty, welfare dependency, single-headed households, and other characteristics that are traditionally associated with street gang formation.

This perspective corresponds to the structural analysis of crime and homicide that emphasizes the importance of social context or structural conditions in high rates of homicides and other crimes among the poor and other minority groups. Social disorganization theory, which has a long tradition in the social sciences, is a variant of this perspective, with its emphasis on the socioeconomic and ecological variables as explanatory factors rather than on individual characteristics. When crime and interpersonal violence, particularly homicide, happen among Latino youth gangs, it will more likely occur in communities associated with structural characteristics such as poverty and social isolation.

Others argue that homicides and other types of interpersonal violence are more closely associated with subcultural factors. This perspective fosters the view that "lower-class communities generate a distinctive moral universe that glorifies and legitimates aggressive behavior, particularly among male juveniles" (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003: p157). Ruth Horowitz (1983) found a prevailing "code of honor" shaping young Latino residents' values and behavior in Chicago. As well, Anderson (1999) identified a "code of the streets" in a disadvantaged Philadelphia neighborhood and two inner-city New York communities. Specifically, this subculture revolves around a street socialization process that emphasizes the development of collective and individual coping strategies that use violence as a means of resolving conflicts (Anderson, 1999).

Situational-level factors are those factors that have an immediate influence on the initiation or outcome of violence or other deviant behavior. Situational-level analyses treat the incident or event as the unit of analysis. Sampson and Lauritsen's (1994) discussion of violent events focuses on such factors as the presence and types of weapon, the presence of drugs or alcohol, the role of bystanders, and victims' degree of resistance and retaliation. Such micro-level factors and processes suggest mechanisms and properties that can

contribute to a deeper understanding of violence. This situational approach is highly appropriate for violence and other behaviors among gang members who are involved in street gangs and marginalized and segmented from the majority society.

Gang-Related Homicide Research

Studies focusing on youth gang homicides have identified an increase in this trend across cities in the United States (Curry, Ball, & Decker, 1995). Law enforcement surveys have revealed that this increase in gang homicides is related to street gang-motivated events (Klein, 1995b). One specific characteristic associated with gang homicide research has been drive-by shootings (Hutson, Range, & Eckstein, 1996; Moore, 1991; Sanders, 1994). The use of automobiles to drive to opponents' homes or hangouts and to shoot at victims from a moving car has become a widely used tactic among youth gangs. Drive-by shootings, however, tend to vary among cities. For instance, Block, Antigone, Jacob, and Przybylski (1996) found that in Chicago, drive-by shootings were not as prevalent as in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles (1979–1994), approximately 25% of the gang-related homicides were a result of drive-by shootings (Hutson, Range, Kyriacou, Hart, & Spears, 1995).

Other important characteristics that distinguish gang homicides from other homicides are settings, participants, and firearms (Howell, 1999). In comparison with other homicides, gang-related homicides have been identified as generally involving more participants where the victim-offender had no prior contact (Maxson, Gordon, & Klein, 1985, page 220). This study concluded that “it is evident that gang incidents are generally more chaotic, with more people, weapons, offenses, and injuries.” Other studies have provided further evidence that gang homicides were characterized by taking place in public spaces where the use of firearms was common (Klein & Maxson, 1989). It is clear that the growing availability of firearms has contributed to the increase in -related deaths among inner-city youth (Block & Block, 1993; Umemoto, 2006).

One of the unresolved issues in the study of street gang homicides is determination of whether homicide committed by gang members is gang related or a result of interpersonal conflict between individuals or groups who are affiliated with the gangs. That is, was the homicide a purposeful gang-related behavior related to the instrumental or expressive goals of the gang or a result of something much more personal that occurs in a collective transaction (Luckenbill, 1977)?

The unprecedented increase of youth involvement in gangs and homicide is a major concern in many Southwestern urban communities. While homicide is allegedly associated with street gangs more than other groups (the exception is intimate partner homicides), few studies have examined the complexity associated with this type of violence among this segment of the population. This article takes the theoretical perspective that although there are multiple-level factors that are continually interacting with each other, the situational factors remain the most challenging in understanding gang members' susceptibility to homicide. Approaching this subject from a situational perspective increases our opportunity to understand the homicides involving male gang members within the complex social system in which they are embedded. Moreover, these findings begin to explore the reasons this type of violence is concentrated among Mexican Americans rather than immigrants who live in the same neighborhoods.

Method

This article is derived from a National Institute on Drug Abuse investigation entitled Drug-Related Gang Violence in South Texas, which examines the epidemiology of violence and drug use among male gang members in San Antonio, Texas. The sample was randomly

drawn by catchment area, gang types, and gang membership status from 26 gangs in San Antonio's West and neighborhood catchment areas. The sample consisted of 160 male gang members between 14 and 25 years old. The study used three data collection methods: focus groups, social and economic indicators, and *life history/intensive interviews* (Yin, Valdez, Mata, & Kaplan, 1996).

San Antonio, Texas, is located 140 miles from the U.S.–Mexico border. The population in 2000 was estimated to be 1.2 million, with approximately 60% of Mexican descent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). The West and South Side community in San Antonio is composed predominantly of Mexican-origin persons and is one of the poorest urban areas in the United States. According to the census data, the per capita income was \$5,098, and the median household income was \$14,352 for 22 census tracts that constitute this community. Some 55% of the families had children living in poverty, and only 23% of the families received public assistance. It is also an area that has a high concentration of crime, violence, and substance use (Yin et al., 1996). More relevant, in these neighborhoods is the highest concentration of delinquent behavior and gang activity in the city.

A life history/intensive interview was used to obtain data from the male gang members. The life history/intensive interview was designed to provide quantitative and qualitative data through the use of open- and closed-ended questions. The instrument consisted of the use of "scenarios," which are open-ended questions that allowed for "thick descriptions" of specific events, situations, and incidents. The structure of the scenario questions combines qualitative narratives with a matrix of closed-ended quantitative responses. The data used in this study were derived from a series of scenario questions that addressed the last time the participant saw someone get killed. This avoided the problem of having the participant admit to participating in a homicide but did allow him to discuss the homicide incident from a third-person perspective.

Analysis

For the purposes of this article, the homicide event is used as the unit of analysis. The qualitative analysis was based on the grounded theory approach. Open coding was accomplished by a line-by-line reading of the transcriptions. Each scenario narrative was read and coded for categories such as victim–offender relationship, circumstance, motive, drug relatedness, and weapons. Each of the interviews was conducted face-to-face with the eligible participants. The level of detail and the range of information elicited from the respondents resulted in the collection of descriptions of the same event from different respondents. In many instances, members of the victim's or offender's gang described the same homicide. Two or more respondents recounted 13 of the 28 homicides.

Results

The mean age of the participants ($N = 160$) was 19 years old, with approximately 26% enrolled in school at the time of the interview. The majority were unattached young men. About 31% reported having children. Poly-drug use was also characteristic of the respondents, with more than 90% reporting lifetime marijuana and cocaine use and 51% reporting having sold drugs within the past 3 months. Table 1 reflects the criminal involvement of the participants. As expected, a large percentage of the participants were involved in delinquent behavior. More than half of the respondents reported firing a gun or owning and/or carrying one within 30 days preceding the interview. Approximately 56% had been arrested for a violent or nonviolent crime.

Gang Types and Homicides

In a previous analysis, we created a typology of the gangs. Four classifications of Mexican American gangs were constructed (Valdez, 2003). These types included criminal-adult dependent gangs, criminal nonadult dependent gangs, barrio-territorial gangs, and transitional gangs. It should be noted that this classification of these gangs is a sociological snapshot taken at the beginning of this study. The gang's place in this typology may have changed during the years, depending on a variety of factors that are addressed in previous publications.

Table 1 indicates that the largest numbers of homicides were committed by criminal non-adult dependent gangs, whereas the least numbers of homicides were committed by two criminal adult dependent types. The three gangs in the criminal non-adult dependent gangs classification were organized as a criminal enterprise with a distinct hierarchy and a distinct leadership structure. They are involved in more independent and personal (non-adult dependent) illegal activities such as drug dealing, car theft, robbery, and carjacking. The gangs offer an organizational structure to protect the interests of individual gang members, not as a centralized criminal enterprise. Members display high rates of drug and alcohol abuse. There is an absence of adult influence on these criminal gangs, which may explain the higher number of homicides.

The criminal nonadult dependent gang with the highest number of homicides was Varrio La Paloma (VLP), whose members were involved in 7 of the 28 murders. VLP is located in a public housing project and an older subdivision. There are approximately 100 hard-core and 80 marginal members in the VLP gang. During the 3 years of this study, the gang was involved in a war with a rival gang located in the residential neighborhood adjacent to the San Miguel projects. It was also involved in a serious conflict with a Chicano adult prison gang (the Brotherhood), which was attempting to take control of the heroin market in the projects. Two adult gang members were murdered by a VLP member when they refused to cooperate with him. Eventually, the VLP reached a compromise with the adult gang. The VLP would be allowed to sell cocaine and marijuana, but the heroin trade would be the exclusive right of the prison gang.

The least number of homicides was committed by the adult criminal dependent gangs (prison gang dependent and adult gang dependent). For instance, the Nine-Ball Crew is one of these types. During the course of the study, members from this gang committed only one murder. What distinguished this gang from the VLP is that it had direct ties to the Brotherhood, which controlled the heroin trade in this community. During the preceding two decades, this prison gang has established a criminal network outside the prison that controls the heroin trade in San Antonio and other South Texas cities. During the past few years, it has recruited several youth gangs to sell heroin for it. The control it has over the Nine-Ball Crew is its most successful. The prison gang discourages random or episodic acts of violence by Nine-Ball Crew members or any of its other youth gang affiliates since those acts draw the attention of law enforcement, which could disrupt the prison gang's sophisticated drug-dealing operations. This may help explain why its members were involved in 1 of the 28 homicides identified in this study.

Twelve were committed by barrio/territorial and transitional gangs. Barrio/territorial gangs are located in various types of neighborhoods, ranging from public housing to residential single-family homes. Twelve gangs are categorized as this type. These are not as hierarchical as the above-mentioned groups. Criminal activities include drug dealing, auto theft, burglary, robbery, vandalism, criminal mischief, and other petty crime. These crimes tend to be more individual, less organized, and less gang directed. Violent behavior tends to be more random and personal. Except for gang turf disputes, most violence is centered on

interpersonal fights and random situational acts of violence often associated with male bravado. Even gang drive-by shootings tend to be spontaneous and predicated on issues such as defending the gang's honor. These gang members use drugs similarly to the other groups, with the exception of a low prevalence of heroin use. They tend to operate independently of any adult gang influence. Most territorial gangs are in transition relative to a trajectory, that is, growing in membership and reputation or fading organizationally.

Spatial Ecology of Homicides

As mentioned earlier, the 26 gangs from the sample were located on the West and South Side communities of San Antonio. All the 26 gangs claimed territories within neighborhoods in these areas. These territories were separated by specific streets or natural boundaries such as public parks or creeks or ditches. Some of the larger gangs claimed physical spaces that included entire neighborhoods, often encompassing 5 to 10 city square blocks. Several of these larger gangs had subsets that controlled smaller areas of these larger territories. These were often smaller neighborhoods distinguished by clearly identified street boundaries. About a third of the gangs claimed territories that were based on public housing units. In some cases, some of the larger housing units were divided into 3 or 4 distinct gangs.

These 26 gangs had a history of conflict often centered on disputes over areas that each claimed or over criminal activities, particularly the sale of drugs. A large proportion of the homicides were between gangs whose territories were adjacent to each other. We argue that this spatial proximity between the victim's and offender's gang contributed to situations that led to the escalation of incidents leading to violence. For instance, while there were reports of circumstances in which a rival gang member would be allowed in a rival's territory (i.e., when he was just passing through or invited by a neutral nongang resident), acts such as wearing colors or throwing signs while in someone else's territory were a violation of the gang's ethos. The two gangs involved in the following homicide were from two distinct neighborhoods geographically divided by a natural boundary (major thoroughfare). Even with the presence of this boundary, these youth were in constant contact with each other. Pedro, a member of the Chicano Boyz, a criminal non-adult dependent gang, described the events that unfolded the night when a rival gang member was unexpectedly surprised in their territory sporting his colors:

Yeah he was passing by there like nobody was around. But we were all inside the house. This guy didn't see nobody and he took out his black rag. Then my homeboy was passing by on his bike and he just started whistling. Everybody looked outside. We all just came outside and we got him. We just started kicking his ass. He was crying and shit. He was like, "Nah man, leave me alone. Just let me go." We then put him in the car and we took him somewhere else. We kicked his ass some more. We shanked (knifed) his ass a lot of times. After, we dropped him off in the street.

Similarly, Chris, a member of the Nine-Ball Crew, a prison-connected gang, recounted how he and his fellow gang member were caught "slipping" (i.e., unexpectedly caught with their guard down—not aware of surroundings) in a rival gang's territory.

Me and RadioMan were walking over by the wall and didn't notice we went into their neighborhood. It was around Christmastime. At first I thought they were firecrackers, but then I saw they were shooting at us from the alley. I got shot in the stomach. When I turned around. RadioMan got shot too. All I remember was seeing him lying there, and he died in the ambulance.

The details of the homicide were recounted by several other respondents from RadioMan's gang. For instance, Mike recalled how he heard the shooting and ran over and saw his friend bleeding.

I was at my mother-in-law's house, and my sister-in-law came in yelling that they had shot one of my friends. I ran over there. He was shot. He had a lot of blood, and it was coming out of his mouth. I think it hit him in the heart. It took a long time for the ambulance to get there.

Violence associated with gangs claiming streets in the same neighborhood was common. Most of these incidents were spontaneous, and typically the victim tended to be outnumbered by offenders. In one instance, the victim was walking down a street that was claimed by two well-known gangs in the neighborhood. He was recognized by members of the offending gang, and as Timoteo, a 17-year-old member of the VLP gang (criminal non-adult dependent) recalled, approximately 17 individuals were involved in the incident:

He was walking in the hood. We recognized him. We just started beating the shit out of him. I don't know for how long, but it didn't seem to be too long. We were just kicking his ass, and then he just didn't make no more noises or nothing. There was about 17 or 18 of us. We just left him there, and the police came and found him.

It was observed that most of the gang territories were demarcated by gang graffiti on buildings and other locations that would identify the neighborhood with a respective gang (i.e., show that the gang claimed the area). However, this demarcation of physical territories was less prominent among the more adult-criminal oriented gangs, who actually prohibited graffiti because it often attracted police attention and antagonized homeowners and small businesses. Also, within the larger community, there were social spaces that were considered neutral, such as some public recreational areas, community retail centers, downtown, and some night clubs and bars located outside the area. Nevertheless, the data above describe the risk these young men are exposed to as either victims or perpetrators, given the geographic proximity to rival territories.

Victim–Offender Personal Relationships

Data presented here reflect the nature of the victim–offender relationship as identified in the descriptions of each of the homicide events. Overall, the relationship between the victim and the offender for the reported homicides was primarily between rival gang members. That is, 19 of the 28 homicidal events were between members from adversary gangs in the neighborhood. For instance, the following describes the volatile relationship that had emerged between two transitional gangs (Killing Crew and AOS):

It all started in high school. They [the offender's gang] were all jocks, and we [the victim's gang] were just ordinary people. They were all older than us and were in the 12th grade. We were only 9th graders. What started it all was because we knocked them down at school [in status]. We just took over, and they didn't like that. That's what started it all.

The day it happened, we were going to a party. It was me, Patrick, Allen, Marc, and two other of my friends. We were getting ready to leave; we were in front of Marc's house. All of a sudden the AOS, they just started shooting at us. They hit Marc in the head and one of the other guys in the heart. They both died right on the spot. They also hit Patrick five times. He lost a lot of blood. He almost didn't make it at all. When it happened we ran, but when we looked back, there were three of them hit already on the floor.

The two gangs continued their feud for approximately another year until the AOS (offender's gang) fell apart. The Killing Crew (victim's gang) eventually became the dominant gang in the neighborhood.

Similarly, the following account details the events that led to the death of a 17-year-old who was part of a barrio/territorial gang (Hangers) that had been in constant disputes with a nearby rival gang. Antonio, a fellow Hangers member who was with the victim, recounted the events of that day:

We were walking in the middle of the field in the courts [housing projects] where the playground is at. We were walking across it, and I guess they [rival gang] had fucking seen us and were waiting for us to pass by. We saw them, and they were going to start shooting at us. We just began running. Then my friend got it! He like fell then got back up and he started fucking running. He kept saying, "I'm hit. I'm hit." I said, "Don't fuck around dude." I didn't believe him. Then I saw him fall again. I just went over there and I tried to pick him up. He just kept saying he wanted his mom. There was chingos of blood.

For the remaining homicides, distinct relationships were observed between the victim and offender. For instance, five of the homicides were between acquaintances. In most of these, the victim and offender did not have a close personal relationship but knew each other from the neighborhood. One participant described how one of his fellow members (in Nine-Ball Crew) shot and killed a man that the offender knew from the neighborhood:

We were in the neighborhood hanging out. T-Man was there, and then this guy showed up and started talking shit, saying he was a big time member of the adult prison gang. T-Man told him, "You're nobody" and shit, and then he kicked his ass in front of every. He told him to split, and the man didn't want to leave. He was with his girlfriend. T-Man told him to leave again, but he didn't want to. Then T-Man just took out a gun, and he just shot him with a gauge, and he just fell down. We were all freaking out. I just took off.

Two of the five cases were identified as drug acquaintances. That is, the victim and offender were familiar with one another through previous drug transactions. In one of these cases, a member of a transitional gang confronted a dealer who came into his neighborhood and was selling a bad product. Although the gang member did not have a close relationship with the dealer, he did admit to having scored from the victim in the past.

This dude was from the North side, and that's why we started getting after him. You know, hey look, when you are buying drugs to sell drugs, you get good shit. You don't fuck around with these punk ass dealers.

As previously mentioned, although the majority of the relationships between the victim and offender were characterized as rival members, there were two incidents that involved members from the same gang. Sammy, a 19-year-old member of Chicano Boyz, describes the death of a member of his gang during one of their regular meetings:

He was a homeboy, he wanted to get out. He told us that he wanted to get out because of his chick (girlfriend). We told him, all right, well, we are going to have to roll you out because you don't dis [disrespect] a homeboy for a ho [girl]. We were all drunk, and he was dissing us for just to go with his chick. So they kicked his ass. He was just laying there, then they just cracked his head open with a rock. They killed him.

The above-mentioned incident was described by several members of this gang, including some of the victim's close friends, who were present and witnessed the incident.

In two additional homicides, a stranger was involved in one and a bystander in the other. Both of the victims in these separate homicides were residents of the respective neighborhood the gang involved was from. The first was an older man who happened to be waiting for the public bus at the time of the rival gang shootout. One of the targeted victims recalled, "We were just walking, and then we saw them and they tried to shoot at us, but some old man was just passing by, and they hit him." In the second, an African American man confronted a couple of members of the VLP and was shot and killed at the front doorsteps of his home. A member of the gang describes the details of the homicide:

We were just there kicking back and stuff and the cops came around. We had just done a job (drug transaction), and we were packing (carrying a weapon). When we saw the cops, we just took off, fuck it. Well Kid threw his gun on top of that man's house. I didn't throw away my gun. We then went to my homeboy's house, and we were smoking out there and getting all fucked up, and Kid said, "let's go for my gun." We went back, and one of my other homeboys told us that the Black man had gotten the gun. We knocked on his door but he didn't come out. Kid told him, "give me back my fucking gun; all we want is my gun." He then came out running at us with a bow and arrow and we started firing and shit. I don't know—the guy just fell down and he died.

Drug and Alcohol Relatedness of the Homicides

Of the 28 homicide incidents, 3 are identified as being intrinsically related to the system of drug distribution and use. For instance, one respondent described his confrontation with a dealer from the North side of San Antonio who was being accused of selling adulterated drugs. Pedro, a member of the transitional gang named VC Outlaws, discussed how the dealer did not know anything about the drug business in the neighborhood. He (the victim) did not even know he was dealing in a neighborhood where the adult prison gang controlled the business.

Well my homeboy had bought some coke, and he said it wasn't good. So I told him I would go and fix it. I met the dude in my neighborhood, and it all went to shit. I told him, "Hey, if you're going to buy drugs to sell, you need to get good shit. You don't fuck around with this shit." He then pulled out a small gun, I think it was a 380. But I had the advantage because I think he was all fucked up on coke. I told him, "vato (man), what you did, I'm just coming over to fix it." That's when I slapped the gun and I already had mine on him and boom.

In yet another case, the homicide was committed within the context of a drug dealing hierarchy related to enforcing the norm of paying 10% to the adult prison gang. Goldy, a member of the VLP, who walks with the help of two crutches, described the violent confrontation he had with two members of the adult prison gang:

They [adult prison gang] put a contract on me and sent two hit men. I did not want to pay 10% to them, so they came after me. They shot first but missed. I shot back and hit both of them. But they still shot at me and hit me in the thigh and knee. The knee is the one that still gives me a lot of trouble. But I killed both of them. A lot of my homeboys ran when the shit hit the fan.

Goldy went on to describe how he started out by selling dime bags, and then before he knew it, he was selling 3 or 4 ounces of heroin and coke a week. The adult prison gang attempted to recruit him to no avail, which escalated into the violent confrontation.

There were eight incidents in which the victim and/or offender was reportedly using drugs or alcohol. Specifically, in two of these homicides, both the victim and the offender were intoxicated. The victim was intoxicated in four and the offender in six of the eight homicide

events. For instance, Abel, who was part of the Trece, a criminal adult (prison) dependent gang, recounted how his friend was murdered by a member of the rival Hangers gang:

They just rolled up on Cat. We had been kicking back at his girlfriend's, getting high. But he was fine. He wasn't very stoned. He had just come out of the house. He was walking down the street then you just hear pop, pop, pop! I had to go and tell his mom. She came over and the ambulance got there. He was still alive but then died. I couldn't do shit.

In a couple of instances, the victim was drunk or high and was caught "slipping" by the offender. The following ongoing rivalry between two gangs in a housing project resulted in the death of a 19-year-old. The homicide occurred on New Year's Eve between the VLP and the Thugs. Apparently, earlier in the day, the Thugs had chased some VLP in a truck, but nothing happened. Later that night the VLP retaliated.

I wasn't there, but I was across the street. Earlier that day five Characters had chased me in a minitruck. They were chasing me, and I ran to the other side, and I called my homeboys. Eight of us came back, and they were having a party, and everybody went inside because they saw us coming. One guy stayed outside. He was really drunk. It was the Character that was driving when they chased me. He was outside, he was taking a piss, and my homeboy just shot him in the neck, and he was going down, and they shot him in the back, and he was on the floor. He was twitching, and they shot him in the chest. It was like at 2-foot range with a 12-gauge.

Circumstance and Motives Associated With Homicides

Each homicide narrative was read and coded for circumstance and motives. Similar to Spunt et. al. (1998), the homicides were viewed as events that occurred over time (1998), that is, incidents that occurred over time, with two or more people experiencing a progression of interaction that resulted in death. Through the course of the interaction, the circumstances and motives changed. Thus, given the complexity of homicides, the narratives allowed for a preliminary examination of the multiple social circumstances and motives associated with the 28 gang homicide events.

This preliminary qualitative analysis revealed five distinct codes for circumstances and six different codes for motives. For coding purposes, *circumstance* was defined as the specific condition, situation, or event that was occurring at the time of the homicide. *Motives* were defined as the reason, cause, purpose, intention, drive, or object associated with the homicide. Analyses revealed that in many instances, there was a history associated either with the individual victim and offender or with their respective gangs. Most of the incidents had more than one circumstance or motive, which resulted in multiple codes for the incidents.

Circumstances

- Drug-related dispute: argument associated with drug transactions, use, or a combination
- Personal dispute: argument associated with personal issue
- Gang dispute: gang-related issues
- Assault: victim attacked and taken by surprise
- Rolling out: gang exit rite that entails a physical beating by several gang members

Motives

- Personal vendetta: feud between victim and offender
- Gang revenge or retaliation: retribution associated with specific gang incident
- Gang rivalry: ongoing feud between two gangs
- Territorial trespassing: intruding into rival gang's neighborhood, turf, barrio
- Gang solidarity: expression of shared goals, norms, and aims among gang members (camaraderie)
- Spontaneous retaliation: personal spontaneous (spur of the moment) retribution or defense

Since the majority of the victim–offender relationships involved rival gang members, the majority of the circumstances and motives were identified as gang revenge or rivalry. The following two narratives depict a gang dispute (circumstance) of an ongoing gang rivalry (motive) that resulted in the death of a 15-year-old who had just joined the gang 1 week before his death. Leo (of the Chicano Boyz) was in the car with the victim when the shooting happened and described how the events unfolded:

We were in the cars, and we saw each other, and we talked shit to each [other], and they had stopped. That's when we stopped, and we had the cars facing backwards. We stopped and talked shit, and they stopped not even like 6 or 8 feet away from us, and that's when they started shooting, so we took off. They shot like eight times, and then that's when we all got down, and then that's when we snapped when Luc got shot. He wanted to like scream but he couldn't scream. They shot him from the back, and it came out through the front.

The feud continued for a number of months between members of the Chicano Boyz and Blasters Inc and resulted in several drive-by shootings. Juan, a member of the Chicano Boyz, informed us a few months after the killing of Luc that his family had to reinforce the front of the house with half-inch steel plates because of several drive-bys committed by the Blasters. Nine months after Juan's interview, our field staff learned that Juan's mother had been killed during a drive-by shooting at their home. After her death, the father and Juan's siblings moved out of state.

The following narrative is distinct from the previous one in that it describes a homicide associated with a gang dispute and assault (circumstances) caused by gang retaliation or revenge (motive). This killing was the beginning of an ongoing feud between the Trece and the Angeles. A member of the Trece recalled how he saw his friend get killed:

Chuco was going to pick me up, but he offered some chick a ride. They got to by where I was. They got to like the corner before you turn where he was going to pick me up. Some car just pulled up and shot him at point blank with an AK in the head. The girl just jumped out the car; she knew what was going to happen. I hear the shot and then a couple of more shots, and that's when me and Gabe came out running, and we saw the car take off, and Chuco was shaking on the ground.

The rivalry continued, and a few weeks later, a member of the Angeles was shot and killed in retaliation for Chuco's death. A member of the Trece explained:

Well that was for getting back at them for killing Chuco. I was with them, and this homeboy was all upset about Chuco. He rolled up on Ray; he saw him come out of a girl's house. He was walking down the street, and then he just shot him: pop.

There were several homicides that were characterized as being personal (circumstance) and spontaneous (motive) and that escalated into violent confrontations within the situational context of the gang subculture. In one incident, a respondent described how the behavior of an acquaintance who was not a gang member escalated into a confrontation resulting in his death. According to the respondent, the victim was a tecato (addict) who was hanging out with gang members one night while they were partying.

We were in the courts (public housing) having a cookout. We were drinking and having fun. This guy started talking about my homeboy's chick. He didn't know it was his wife. He started looking at her and said he wanted to fuck her. My homeboy got up and went and got an ax and hit him across his head. My homeboy was fucking drunk.

Discussion and Conclusions

Increased street gang activity among San Antonio's Mexican-origin population is associated with a steady decline in structural conditions that has had a devastating impact on poor and working-class segments of this population and has led to increased levels of social disorganization. More specifically, Mexican American inner-city youth have become increasingly marginalized as a result of this economic transformation, which is accompanied by continual discrimination and unequal treatment, especially in the areas where these gang homicides occurred (Bauder, 2002). Confounding the issue is the fact that most of these gang members are from families with multigenerational involvement in poverty, crime, and residential instability, characteristics associated with persons involved in homicide and other violent behaviors (Moore, 1991). As important, many of these Mexican American youth have internalized those properties that socially define and devalue them as minorities.

On a situational level, our data show that the circumstances and motives of the majority of these homicides were predicated on the collective goals and activities of the gang, such as drive-bys or a dispute over turf. These gang homicides were distinct from those that were simply gang member homicides. The latter were homicides committed by gang members but not necessarily for the promotion of the gang's interests, such as retaliation (Tita & Abrahamse, 2006). Among the gang member homicides, the nature and intensity of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim varied, from neighborhood associates to drug acquaintances to strangers. More importantly, these data clarify how all the homicides are associated with distinct street gang values. Social differences between adolescents are the bases for conflict among youth. However, for gang members the distinct context in which they find themselves tends to lead to more violent outcomes than other groups. The "code of the streets" dictates that a gang-affiliated youth in this street subculture is expected to be involved in violence, drug use, crime, and confrontational behaviors. In addition, the use of multiple circumstances and motives is an analytical tool that contributes to an understanding of the complex etiology of violence by moving beyond a classification of homicides that uses only single values.

Geographic proximity of gang territories emerged as an important characteristic in explaining these gang homicides. The fact that most of the homicides were between members of gangs bordering the same neighborhood or area may provide an understanding of the escalation of violent acts between these groups of youth in these neighborhoods. The spatial proximity of two gangs results in frequent contact and high visibility that create a volatile environment susceptible to aggression and violence. These findings are similar to the findings of others that gang homicide was more often turf related than drug related.

Other researchers have categorized gangs into street gangs and drug gangs (Klein, 1995a). Our findings reflect Goldstein's (1985) framework, which characterizes the relationship

between drugs and violence as related to psychopharmacological, economic compulsive, and systemic factors. Based on this, three homicides were classified as systemically drug related, and eight were psychopharmacology related. In the majority of these cases, only one of the parties was pharmacologically impaired, usually the victim. In the majority of the cases, alcohol was the substance most likely to be associated with these homicides. This research supports our earlier findings that documented alcohol use, but not drug use, as associated with arrests for violent crime (Valdez, Kaplan, & Curtis, 2007). Our findings also suggest that criminal gangs are more likely to be involved in systemic forms of violence and discourage excessive drug use.

As others have found, our data indicate that firearms were used in almost all of these homicides (Block & Block, 1993). Of 28 cases, 23 involved the use of a gun, and in almost every type of victim–offender relationship. The use of weapons in these homicides is related to the large percentage of gang members who own, frequently carry, and have actually used one in a fight. This use of guns corresponds to other studies that report adolescent males are more likely than their non-gang peers to carry handguns if they are involved in gangs (Luster & Su Min, 2001). The ominous presence of these lethal weapons corresponds to the relatively high ownership of and easy access to guns in this state. However, as opposed to the general population, guns among this gang population are more likely to be used to settle disputes. This contradicts research that indicates that the use of firearms most often requires a purposive effort (casual relationships) rather than more spontaneous or episodic acts (personal/intimate relationships), in which the offender uses other types of objects. Moreover, our data have important implications, given that research has indicated that carrying a handgun as an early adolescent persists into later life and continual criminal behavior (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000).

In San Antonio, Latino homicides and other violent crimes have not been neutralized by a large influx of immigrants as in other cities (e.g., Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, and Houston). However, this does not mean that Mexican immigrants are absent in this city. In fact, 13% of the total Mexican-origin population in San Antonio was composed of immigrants during the 1990s. Most of these Mexican immigrants and their families lived in the same disadvantaged neighborhoods as did the gang members described in this study. However, participation in gang activity and violence by similarly aged immigrant youth living in these neighborhoods and attending the same schools was almost nonexistent. What is the larger implication of these findings, given that nationally the U.S. foreign-born immigrant population (mostly Mexican) increased by nearly 50% in the past 10 years, to 31 million in 2000? If immigration status is a “protective” against violence, as Sampson has stated, can we expect crime to diminish in Latino neighborhoods? Our position is that it will, but this game will vanish rapidly in subsequent generations as the children of immigrants are socialized into society’s racial hierarchy.

Future homicide research should focus on identifying predisposing factors and predictors by taking into consideration social structural differences and being sensitive to the situational processes that could lead to homicides within local contexts. Our findings begin to identify the etiology of youth gang homicides. Specifically, our data contribute to street gang mediation, dispute resolution, and crisis intervention programs by providing an understanding of how locally embedded social processes associated with specific gang types, ecology, drugs, circumstances, and motives unfold into homicidal events. Last, these findings point to the importance of developing crime prevention programs focused on the children of immigrants.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Criminal Involvement and Homicides Committed by Gang Type

Criminal Activities (N = 160)	%	Gang Type	No. of Gangs (N = 14)	No. of Homicides (N = 28)
Currently own gun	68	Criminal adult dependent (prison)	2	2
Carried a gun in past 30 days	56	Criminal adult dependent (nonprison)	1	1
Sold drugs in past 3 months	51	Criminal nonadult dependent	3	13
Arrested for violent crime	56	Barrio/territorial	4	6
Arrested for nonviolent crime	55	Transitional	4	6
Fired gun in gang-related fight	82			