This qualitative article explores the experiences of two Mexican American families. Both families live in impoverished urban neighborhoods where violence and gang activity are common. Both families have adolescent sons, with varying degrees of interactions with gangs. In-depth interviews with the two adolescent males, enhanced with other family member interviews, are central to this investigation. The purpose of this article is to explore themes and expand on issues surrounding these two adolescents and their families. Specific issues to be uncovered include neighborhood and family dynamics and the adolescents’ relationships and interactions with peers and gangs. More specifically, this article will provide insight into the lives of two contrasting adolescents who are embedded in these poor urban neighborhoods. Their stories elucidate the degree to which households and families are connected, or disconnected, with their surrounding neighborhood, community, and gang presence.

Adolescent Interactions With Gangs, Family, and Neighborhoods
An Ethnographic Investigation

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INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The reality of the lives of poor urban families in America is depicted daily in newspapers and other media. The breakdown of the family, youth violence, and gang activity are frequently mentioned issues that are related to poverty in the urban setting. Poverty impacts families’ ability to fulfill basic personal and familial needs. These problems are confounded by both the immigration and migration across the nation. It is estimated that more than 10 million immigrants entered the United States during the past 10 years (Phillips, 1999). In the United States, 31.8 million people speak another language in the home, including one third of urban public school children (Phillips, 1999). Rapid demographic changes are taking place across the nation, especially in Southern California, where more than half of all children in Los Angeles County live below the poverty level.
line (Phillips, 1999). These conditions contribute to poverty status, daily coping problems, and an increase in criminal and violent activities. Researchers (Ruble & Turner, 2000; Waters, 1999) suggest that there is a predictable and systematic pattern of poor, urban, immigrant youth turning to violence and gangs.

Violence affects all family members who live in poor urban communities, but it may be of particular concern to adolescents living in these gang-ridden neighborhoods. It is an unfortunate reality that crime and interactions with gangs are increasingly becoming a part of adolescent life. Youth living in urban areas experience much higher rates of crime than do youth living in other areas. Gang activity accounts for a large proportion of the increasing level of violence (Adams, Gullotta, & Markstrom-Adams, 1994; Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), 1997; Phillips, 1999).

GANG PRESENCE

Gang activity is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Researchers since the 1920s have studied gangs. Currently, there are approximately 4,800 gangs nationwide, consisting of 250,000 members (BJA, 1997). Howell (1998) estimates that the number of gang members in the United States may be as high as 650,000. Projections from the Bureau of Justice indicate that the incidence of gangs will increase. Their 1997 report predicts the following ethnic breakdowns among gang members in the year 2000: 135,000 Latino, 90,000 African American, 20,000 Asian, and 5,000 Caucasian (BJA, 1997). Another reason for the increase is the phenomenon that gang members are recruited at younger ages and maintain their gang status into their late 30s (BJA, 1997; Lasley, 1992; Maxson & Klein, 1990). With this increase in the numbers of gang members, society can expect an increase in gang-related violence, including drive-bys, robberies, gun warfare, and so on. Why is gang activity so prevalent? Why do youth decide to join gangs?

GANG MEMBERSHIP FACTORS

The beginning of gang recruitment activities usually occurs in or just prior to the early teens, the beginning of adolescence. Adolescence (age 13 to 24) is a time of change, a time for identity development. This time is particularly critical for males who are seeking to prove their masculinity. It is also an important time for minorities seeking an understanding of their ethnicity (Phinney, 1989). Peer pressure, the influence of society, and familial control are important factors in this developmental process. For
some teens, especially males, gang membership can significantly contribute to their identity and sense of belonging (Jankowski, 1991; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Phinney, 1989). Gang membership is a feature of adolescence (Lasley, 1992).


Early works by Thrasher (1927) and Shaw and McKay (1942) indicate that gangs form under conditions of social disorganization, including poverty, substandard housing, and ethnically diverse neighborhoods. These conditions create social instability, including discrimination, segregation, and residential mobility (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Phillips, 1999; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927). The problem is especially confounded among low-income families who have recently immigrated. Immigrant parents often lose control and status in the eyes of their children (Waters, 1999). When immigrant parents do not easily or readily adapt to American society, the children may become estranged from their parents, in addition to being rejected by the dominant American culture. As a result, researchers have noted that gangs provide a mechanism for youth to create a street subculture that simultaneously preserves their native culture and rejects the culture in which they live (Phillips, 1999; Phinney, 1989; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1984; Vigil, 1988). Researchers refer to this concept as “islands in the streets,” or closed communities created by marginalized youth to separate themselves from the larger community (Jankowski, 1991; Moore, 1978).

The fact that many variables influence gang membership has been a popular concept with researchers. Researchers (Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988) identify this reality as “multiple marginalities.” The larger system (society, neighborhoods, communities, schools, etc.) breaks down for minority youth in poor urban environments (Sanders, 1994; Stone, 1999; Vigil, 1988). The values and mores of “the street” become the values that are internalized by youth who are socialized in these environments. Phillips (1999) eloquently points out that gang membership is an indicator that “society has enabled the development of streets so full of poverty and anxiety that traditional families alone cannot protect their children from
“them” (p. 115). The defragmentation of the system is especially important for a young adolescent male.

APPROACHES TO GANG RESEARCH

A better understanding of adolescent males in poor urban communities and their interactions with gang members and gang activity may be obtained through discussions with gang members, their friends, and their families. Qualitative methods provide an in-depth approach to understanding urban neighborhoods and communities. This type of research is an important addition to the gang literature because much of the previous research in this area has consisted of quantitative studies. More face-to-face, academically rigorous studies are needed in gang research studies (Horowitz, 1990; Phillips, 1999).

Various research approaches have been used to understand the complexity of relevant gang issues. Some research has combined quantitative and qualitative methods, or combined interviews with theoretical underpinnings (Barker, 1998; Hagedorn, 1994; Omizo et al., 1997; Phillips, 1999; Sanders, 1994). These types of studies avoid the “top down” manner in which many studies are conducted because they seek knowledge directly from the “source” (Hagedorn, 1994; Phillips, 1999). In addition, several anecdotal, “bottom up” gang interviews have been published, but most are not theory-based or research driven (Atkins, 1996; Bing, 1991; Hinojosa, 1995; Rodriguez, 1998). The above-mentioned studies are, therefore, limited in their descriptive power and their contribution to academic literature. Whereas studies have focused on interviewing gang members, qualitative studies that conduct intensive investigations into the lives of adolescents, their families, and their neighborhoods are scant. Because entire families, as well as community members, are interviewed in this study, a unique perspective is gained. An ethnographic investigation of young urban males, specifically of one who chose to join a gang contrasted with one who stayed out of gang activity, is an innovative way to understand the dynamics of the familial and social lives of adolescents.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In 1974, Urie Bronfenbrenner stated that “much of American developmental psychology is the science of the behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults” (p. 3). Twenty years later, McKinney, Abrams, Terry, and Lerner (1994) stated that much of the child development litera-
ture continues to focus on middle-class European American children in laboratory settings. Vigil (1988), in his research on gangs, stresses the confluence of diverse forces that impact on gang members—a framework he calls “multiple marginalities.” Vigil (1988) states,

Complex societies require complex frameworks of analysis. A multidimensional analysis identifies the crucial weaves within the broader fabric of the gang subculture. Indeed, it can show us how gang members experience multiple crises and confusion over living, working, associational, developmental, and identity situations and considerations. (p. 173)

This study incorporates Vigil’s ideas by using a conceptual framework that entails such an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979). This framework recognizes the relationships between and among individuals and the environments in which they are embedded. The Bronfenbrenner model includes four systems levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. This model was adapted to guide examination of the lives of the urban poor, nested in the contexts of families, neighborhood, community, city, cultural community, government, and so on.

Using this framework, data were collected from individual members of the family to comprise a “constellation” of people, settings, and relationships that help paint a portrait of the family. The framework helps to organize these constellations and relationships. All people and environmental aspects that directly affect an individual (immediate settings) are microsystem level data. For example, an adolescent male’s relationships with his mother, father, and friends influence his life at the microsystem level. Possible settings in which this male functions at the microsystem level include the home, market, or school. The mesosystem level includes interrelationships between any two persons or settings in the adolescent male’s microsystem. For example, the relationship between the male’s school and social service programs may impact his life.

The exosystem level includes the abstract environments that affect the microsystem and mesosystem element. The social institutions, neighborhood conditions, local events, and policies that are a part of the individual’s local environment are classified at the exosystem level. In the case of the adolescent male, neighborhood gang presence, city government organizations, the local economy, and employment opportunities are factors that affect his life. The macrosystem level includes broad overarching ideologies of culture and religion and the larger political, economic, social, and ecological conditions that influence or are influenced by the families living in poverty.
This framework provided a structure through which data were organized and interpreted. Patterns of relationships across and within levels were sought out. The factors in these levels are influential in the lives of adolescent males living in communities facing poverty and violence.

**RESEARCH DESIGN & METHOD**

Data reported in this article were gathered as part of a larger project. This larger project, a longitudinal, qualitative research study, was employed to investigate service use and family and community dynamics among poor immigrant families. A research team consisting of five researchers investigated service use among three poor and ethnically diverse families in each of three distinct neighborhoods. Three of the researchers interviewed families in these neighborhoods, and the remaining two researchers talked to service providers and community leaders to broaden our understanding of service use by immigrant families. Information in this article focuses on interviews conducted with two Mexican American families living in two of the three neighborhoods.

First, a Mexican American family (including an adolescent gang member) in one poor urban neighborhood was interviewed. A second family in an adjacent urban Mexican American neighborhood, with an adolescent son trying to stay out of gang activity, was also interviewed. These families were chosen for this article because they provide a rich depiction of male adolescent life in ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Their stories provide a glimpse into the lives of two households coping with poverty, gang activity, and violence in their neighborhoods.

More specifically, the purpose of this article is to explore themes and expand on issues surrounding the lives of two adolescent boys—one 18 years old, the other just about to turn 16—and their families. Specific issues to be uncovered include neighborhood dynamics, family relationships, and interactions with peers and gangs. Our in-depth interviews with these adolescents are central to this investigation, although supporting family interviews will also be used for elaboration.

The first 6 months of this study consisted of Phase 1 activities, including rapport building, establishing credibility, and touring and accessing communities in the area. During Phase 1 activities, neighborhood sites were selected, focus groups were conducted, and key informants were identified. It was important to the goals of the study that ethnically diverse, low-income neighborhoods were chosen for investigation. Neighborhood
census data were reviewed, including information on migration patterns, home ownership, ethnicity, income, and receipt of public assistance.

The neighborhoods selected were in the lowest income categories for the city of Long Beach, California (to focus on families living in urban poverty). A program called Neighborhood Improvement Strategies (NIS) was implemented in selected neighborhoods in Long Beach. NIS is a city-sponsored community development program that identifies neighborhoods at risk, based on public safety data, and physical and social conditions. These areas are then targeted for projects to improve neighborhood conditions. In an effort to obtain maximum variability among the three sites, we used the NIS designation to see if differences in the neighborhoods or families could be observed based on the level of NIS involvement. One neighborhood chosen had no NIS involvement, a second neighborhood was an NIS level 1 area (most severe decay—heavy NIS project involvement), and the third neighborhood was an NIS level 2 area (approaching severe decay—preliminary NIS program involvement). The family interviews to be discussed in this article occurred in the first and third neighborhoods.

Following neighborhood selection, windshield surveys (neighborhood driving tours) were conducted and detailed notes were recorded. Detailed street maps of the neighborhoods were photocopied and notations were made of activity, stores, schools, and resources in the area. Focus groups were held, involving personnel from a variety of sources, such as city government, law enforcement, neighborhood associations, service agencies, grassroots organizations, and schools. During these focus groups, key informants were identified. These key informants were ultimately responsible for leading us to families who were willing to be interviewed.

Using information gained from discussions with focus groups and key informants and using purposive sampling techniques, three culturally diverse families living in each of the three neighborhoods were selected for the larger study. Each family qualified as low income and reflected the demographic characteristics of each neighborhood. All neighborhoods chosen were predominantly Latino. However, to obtain maximum variability in ethnicity, neighborhoods with “pockets” of other minority groups were chosen. Therefore, in the two neighborhoods discussed in this report, two Cambodian families, two Filipino families, and two Mexican American families were chosen for inclusion in the study. Data reported in this article stem from the interviews with the two Mexican American families. The sampling strategy for inclusion in this article, therefore, was for homogeneity (Berg, 1998). Homogeneity, in this case, refers to ethnic homo-
geneity (both families were Mexican American) (Berg, 1998). In addition, both families contained adolescent males with knowledge about gangs.

The issue of sample size is worth mentioning. Using larger samples in quantitative research is necessary to achieve generalizability. However, in qualitative research, the goal is to authentically understand families in the contexts in which they are embedded. Although the results from two Mexican American families are certainly not representative of all Mexican American families, an approach emphasizing depth rather than breadth adds to the body of knowledge. Miles and Huberman (1994) indicate that “qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their contexts and studied in depth—unlike quantitative researchers who aim for larger numbers of context-stripped cases and seek statistical significance” (p. 27). Thus, our goal is not for generalization but for description and an in-depth understanding of Mexican American families living in poor urban communities in Long Beach, California.

Phase 2 of the study, data collection, involved in-depth interviewing of families during an 18-month period. Because many of the families were not fluent in English, cultural guides (from the families’ culture) were hired to facilitate the interview process. The following interview questions provided a guideline during the initial interviews:

1. Describe your family.
2. Describe your neighborhood.
3. How did you come to live here?
4. How do you get around your neighborhood and the city?
5. What do you do when a family member is sick?
6. How do you find out about jobs?
7. If you work outside the home, who cares for your children while you are at work?
8. Where do your children go to school? Who do you talk to at the school?
9. How do you get food for the family?
10. Where do you get clothing for the family?
11. Does your family celebrate any special holidays or events?
12. Who cares for your older family members?
13. Who do you go to when you need help? If they can’t help, what do you do?

Although these questions guided us during the first interviews, additional questions and discussions naturally emerged throughout the data collection process. Family members were encouraged to tell their stories and discuss issues that they felt were important. Past interviews, document analysis, and debriefing sessions with the cultural guides provided follow-up questions for subsequent interviews.
Cultural guides not only served as translators of the language, they also helped researchers interpret the culture, body language, intonation, and cultural meanings and contexts of specific topics discussed. In addition, cultural guides helped build rapport with families and consulted (reflected) with researchers after the interviews. The “reflecting sessions” between researcher and cultural guide were extremely helpful in clarifying important points from the interviews. Cultural guides brought their own unique and valuable perspectives to the data collection process. Reflections of cultural guides were recorded in the field journals of the researchers. In addition, the field journals were used to record researcher observations with regard to the interview. For example, field journals contained descriptions of the house and the neighborhood and researcher reflections on interviews. These notes, as well as other corroborating documentation, were used throughout data analysis.

All family interviews reported in this article were conducted in the families’ homes. All interviews were tape recorded and ranged in length from 1 to 3 hours each. Each family member older than age 10 was eligible to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in the families’ native language, unless the interviewee indicated that they felt more comfortable completing the interview in English. Informed consent procedures, in the family member’s language of choice, were implemented before interviews commenced. Cultural guides provided transcription and translation of the audiotaped interviews. Interviews conducted in Spanish were first transcribed into Spanish to maintain data authenticity. Next, they were translated into English for the researchers to review.

During data collection, in-depth interviewing and preliminary data analysis were overlapped for a period of time to allow for the emergence of new and related guiding questions. Participant observation, document analysis, and photo journaling (i.e., families were provided with disposable cameras to document their daily lives) were also used (Andranovich & Riposa, 1993; Stainback & Stainback, 1988). For this article, in-depth interviews are the primary source of data reported; however, document analysis, participant observation, and photo journaling were used to form a context for data collection and analysis. For example, researchers attended community meetings in which gang activity in the neighborhood was discussed. In particular, one meeting with a local police officer provided researchers with information about gang language, gang territoriality, drug activity, and so on.

Data analysis consisted of numerous readings of interview transcriptions and analyzing the information in a cultural context. It is important to
go beyond what appears obvious and seek to connect and discover the conceptual themes that have emerged. To make this connection and build a pattern of relationships, a constant comparative strategy was used (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). The constant comparative strategy involves reviewing data to create categories (codes) to document the patterns, uncover themes, and observe the continuation of these patterns in other interviews.

To maintain the confidentiality of the family members who devoted so much time to this study, all names have been changed. The descriptions and specific events of their lives are, however, accurately portrayed.

THE VALEZ FAMILY

The Valez family consists of six children (three girls and three boys) and their mother, Rosa. Rosa separated, but did not get divorced, from Pedro, the children’s father, 4 years ago. Pedro now lives about 1 hour away from the family. Three of Rosa’s children live at home on a regular basis; Juan, age 8; Maria, age 6; and Beatrice, age 16. Her oldest daughter, Ramona, age 22, lives in Mexico with her boyfriend. Her two eldest sons, Jorge, age 19, and Jose, age 15, are both in prison for gang-related activities. The younger son, Jose, is in California Youth Authority (prison for minors). During one of our prescheduled interviews, we arrived at the house to find that Jorge was recently released on parole from adult prison. The detailed interview with him provided a plethora of information about the adolescent experience.

The family lives in a small, two-bedroom apartment, with three cats and two birds. On occasion, Salvatore, Rosa’s brother from Mexico, stays in the apartment when he visits from Mexico. Rosa does not speak English and, in fact, is not fully literate in Spanish. On arrival at her apartment for our initial interview, she was doing homework in preparation for her Spanish class.

Rosa does not work outside the home. She receives $713 plus food stamps each month to support her family. To make extra money on the side, she collects cans and cashes them in. She told us that recently, neighborhood police detained her for “stealing” cans from recycling bins. She was not taken into custody or charged with any crime. She was given a verbal warning to stop taking cans.

Rosa entered the country with Coyotes (people who illegally smuggle Mexican nationals across the border from Mexico to the United States).
Experiences such as hers have been depicted in films such as *El Norte*. First, her father entered the United States, and she followed. She told us she later received her green card through Amnesty.

The neighborhood in which she lives has recently been identified as a target for the NIS program. This indicates that the neighborhood is approaching severe decay in areas such as infrastructure, public safety, violence, and so on. Rosa told us that she chose this neighborhood 4 years ago because it was better and cheaper than where she lived previously. Primarily, she wanted affordable rent because her government aid is limited.

**THE HERNANDEZ FAMILY**

The Hernandez family is a close-knit, cohesive family. Marta and her husband, Antonio Sr., have three children. The oldest, Antonio Jr., is 15, his sister Lourdes is 11, and the baby sister, Aurelia, is 17 months. Anna, the mother of Antonio Sr., lives across the hall. Anna has been battling cancer and is receiving radiation treatments. Antonio Sr.’s brother, Enrique, is a frequent visitor and guest of Anna. In addition, several extended family members also live within the city.

Antonio Sr. has been out of work and on disability for several years. He has constant back and stomach pain. In the past 6 years, he has undergone over six operations on his colon. His condition makes it difficult for him to lift heavy objects or walk around for long periods of time. Because he is self-employed (he owned a truck that he hired out), he is unable to get unemployment or disability assistance. On occasion, he plays music with a local band. Typically, he makes $50 per night. He and Marta agree that it is often not worth the money; they would rather be spending time together as a family. Marta does not work outside the home; she stays with the children. When Aurelia was born, they received an additional $10 worth of food stamps from the government for the baby. The family lives on welfare; their medical bills are paid by Medi-Cal. When money is running low, nearby family members help by bringing groceries to the family.

The Hernandez family lives in a small apartment building in the downtown area. The family has lived in the same apartment since 1981. The neighborhood in which they live has been on a steady decline. It is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Long Beach, California. Although the neighborhood has not yet been targeted by the NIS program, crime, infrastructure decay, and a recent closure of the adjacent U.S. Naval shipyard has contributed to rapid deterioration of the community.
EMERGENT THEMES

During the course of the study and throughout data analysis, themes emerged within the Valez and Hernandez families. As family members were interviewed, information about the dynamics in the neighborhood became evident. The safety of the neighborhood was an issue with both families. Of particular importance, two of the adolescent boys felt the daily pressure of living in a violent community. Throughout interviews with Jorge and Antonio Jr., information was gained about their neighborhood, family relationships, and their interactions with peers and gangs. It became apparent that the violent neighborhoods in which they live affect their social relationships. The families could not always insulate their children from the surrounding community. It was not possible for parents to control the actions of their children when they left the safety of the house. Interactions with gang members, on some level, were inevitable. The families were affected by gang activity; experiences with gangs affected family relationships. Understanding the roles of neighborhood, community, and family helps shed light on the development of these adolescents' lives.

NEIGHBORHOOD DYNAMICS

Poor neighborhoods often fail to provide access to basic family needs. There is an explicit denial of legitimate resources (Jankowski, 1991; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Phillips, 1999; Stone, 1999). As a result of limited resources, neighborhood conditions become unsafe due to the resulting competition, oftentimes by illegal means. In many cases, gangs are the perpetrators of these illegal activities.

Both families are concerned about their safety. The mothers of these two families discuss their thoughts about the neighborhoods:

Rosa Valez: They [the kids] ask me to try to get out of here, to a better area. But to pay so much in rent, I can’t. And my husband does not help me.

Marta Hernandez: Well I’m going to tell you what I think. I liked it better before. Because when we first came here, everything was clean, everything was peaceful, there were no gangs, there were no problems. Now there are gangs everywhere. Sometimes right here, in front of our house, [are] a bunch of gang members. Sometimes they are Latino, sometimes Black. People come looking like they just came from an outing. They eat and throw stuff on the ground. Well, I don’t like it as before. But we are unable to move.
Financial constraints force both families to remain where they are. They are unable to escape from declining neighborhood conditions. As a result, they must peacefully coexist in their community. This is not always easy. Both Marta and her husband, Antonio Sr., feel that the police are too kind to the gang members. Antonio Sr. elaborates:

The police should not be friends of the ones they are supposed to be watching. Sometimes we see the patrol cars arrive and they carry on a conversation with them [gang members]. They greet and say, “Goodbye, I’ll see you,” and they [gang members] remain there and the police leave.

Police concern for gang members is not uncommon (Ruble & Turner, 2000). Police often ask gang members, “How are you?” in an effort to build mutual respect in the community. However, in this situation, when families don’t trust their community personnel, they lose faith and begin to withdraw from other parts of their community’s social organizations. Jankowski (1991) purported that when families begin to sense that law enforcement is losing control of the community, they will criticize the police, who they feel are siding with gangs. This is the case in the Hernandez family. They do not feel safe and protected. When their children ask to go to the local Boys and Girls Club, the parents are skeptical. Antonio Sr. explains,

Sometimes we go there, but there are a lot of problems. For example, if my son wants to play basketball, when we get to the park we are not left in peace. So we try to avoid the problem by not going... [the kids] want to go, but I don’t want them to, because it’s a lot of trouble.... If she (daughter, Lourdes), for example, is playing those little games at the table, they [other kids] come and they push her and they take away the game and since they are a group, well....

Marta finishes his thought, saying,

They gather and gang up on her, it’s like a raid. They are not gangs, just a group of kids. You know how active they are, they just like to be mean. Just to give you a hard time.

Safety and violence, even among the young kids, is an issue of concern in these neighborhoods. Evidence of the parent-community separation continues into the school system. Antonio Sr. is also frustrated by the lack of parental involvement at school. He does not understand why parents fail
to attend parent-teacher conferences. He and his wife feel that parents are
wrongfully placing the responsibility of raising their children on the
school system. Antonio Sr. says,

If I have a son, I’m very interested in how he is doing. How can I say the
teacher is not teaching him well? My son is not learning anything, my son is
keeping bad company, my son is talking back to the teacher. We need to find a
way to teach them [children] how to become responsible.

Marta adds to her husband’s ideas:

This is why the youth are so disoriented. Because the parents just get rid of
them, send them to school, make their own decisions. Since they are small,
the parents don’t know if they go to school or not, if they have good report
card, if they are behaving well.

Antonio Sr. continues his discussion of how society tarnishes the minds of
parents and children:

The majority of people that get here (to America), I don’t know why come
with the idea that they have to make a lot of money. That is why there are so
many problems, so many divorces, so many disrespectful children, so many
gang members, so many “cholos” [hoodlums], because the parents don’t
care. The only thing they want is to make money. They say I have to work
and I’m going to make $1,000. They get $1,000, and they say I’m going to
make $2,000. And there they go. And then there comes a time that they no
longer are aware of their surroundings. Not their children’s smiles or their
mischief or the wife’s caresses, or what one can have with their family. It
doesn’t interest them anymore. The only thing they want to make is money.
And what good is money? When we die, we’re all going to go with nothing.
And everything is going to stay here.

Antonio Sr. is frustrated about the negative impact society has on indi-
viduals and families. He is not alone in his feelings that family is impor-
tant. Parents may start becoming cynical about their neighborhood. They
may feel that efforts made to better family-community interaction fail to
yield positive results. This was the case in the Hernandez neighborhood.
When the community pulled together to better the neighborhood, their ef-
forts were squelched. Although NIS program involvement is not in place,
some organized activities have occurred. The family appreciates the
neighborhood improvement strategies, but they feel that efforts are not al-
ways successful. And, again, there is distrust of community personnel,
particularly law enforcement. Marta explains,
It’s [neighborhood improvement] going to be difficult. . . . They had a neighborhood watch effort a while back. For a while, we were doing it jointly with the police. All the women that reported incidents got drive-bys and things like that. . . . The people were getting shot at.

Antonio Sr. confirms,

They had drive-bys for people who gave information.

Marta, while not feeling safe in her home, also does not feel safe with her law enforcement personnel. Following the neighborhood watch effort and the drive-by activity that resulted, Marta began suspecting her neighborhood police:

I think the police is in accord with them [the drug dealers and gang members] because how else would they know who told on them?

Once again, the community breakdown is evident, and there is a feeling that the police are siding with gang members (Jankowski, 1991). In contrast, Jorge, who has interacted frequently with police, does not see it the same way. He feels that police harass known gang members. He shares a recent experience:

I don't like cops, they harass me. They give me a hard time. Like the other day, they picked me up and throw me out in my wrong neighborhood. I didn't tell other cops about it, I kept it to myself. They were beating my homeboy up.

In this instance, Jorge was put in a dangerous situation, another neighborhood. It is well known that gangs are highly territorial, and entering an outside neighborhood could be problematic for a gang member (Jankowski, 1991; Phillips, 1999). In addition, Jorge did not feel he could call on other police for his own or his friend’s protection. As a known gang member, he probably would not be taken seriously.

Neighborhood problems go beyond distrust of law enforcement. The families feel disheartened by the improvement efforts; however, they are still willing to share their ideas about what things they would like to change in the neighborhood. Both families know that neighborhood streets are not safe or clean. Throughout interviews, families talked about ways the neighborhood could be improved. Primary issues were safety and cleanliness.
Rosa: Yes we need them [dumpsters] there in the alley. So that instead of throwing garbage all over . . . if they put those big ones like the one from the city, things would be neater and the streets and alleys would be cleaner.

Antonio Sr.: I think the first thing to do is to patrol, police patrol. Because only when there is gunfire on this street or the next do we have patrol cars. They patrol for two or three days and then they forget all about it. I think that we should instruct [parents] so that they work with their own families and teach children to be more respectful, to take better care of our neighborhood, [keep it] clean and attractive so we can walk around . . .

It is interesting to recognize that although Antonio Sr. and Marta don’t always trust law enforcement, they still realize the need for its steady presence on the streets. Their feelings are in line with Jankowski (1991), who states that families want law enforcement to control the streets. At first observation, their reactions seem in contrast to their distrust of the police for being too lenient with gang members. In fact, Jankowski reconciles these two points of view. He purports that families want and support law enforcement as long as there is order in the community. On the other hand, if the families feel that order is not being installed, they become skeptical and critical of law enforcement.

In some areas, it is evident that law enforcement is not able to keep the streets safe. In fact, certain parts of the neighborhoods are so gang-intensive that some streets are virtually off limits. Antonio Hernandez Jr. and Jorge Valez referred to these areas as gang members’ streets. Street “ownership” by gang members is common according to some researchers (Phillips, 1999; Sanders, 1994). These gang “annexes” divide themselves by street to indicate a subdivision of a gang, or a gang member may simply claim a street as his own territory.

Jorge, as a confessed gang member, claims such street ownership. He showed us his tattoos that proclaim his street. Rosa and Jorge discuss his tattoos and their impact on Jorge’s life. Jorge is involved in street activity, according to his mother. Rosa explains:

He didn’t have the tattoos before. Recently he had them put on. I would tell him not to get them. Now that he has them the police follow him constantly. He just spends his time out on the streets. I tell him to behave so that the police don’t take him. I would feel awful if they took him.

Jorge confirms her worries:

I’m trying to be out, but it seems like I’m not and shit. ’Cause the cops have been giving me a hard time . . . because of the tattoos that I got. They’re not
that bad. That’s my gang initial. The gang sign (pointing to tattoos). That’s my street (pointing to a tattoo of a number 11 on his chest). When I was about 11 years old I started gang banging. Eleven is my street (i.e., 11th Street), and I guess 11 days after my birthday I got shot. Yeah, it’s my favorite number.

Antonio Jr. confirmed what Jorge told us about street ownership. He told us that some streets simply belong to gang members. We asked him to elaborate on what he meant by “their street”:

That’s where they all hang out. The Westsiders. That’s the name of the Westside Longo. . . . They live everywhere. . . . You really can’t get out. You can’t go anywhere without seeing them.

Because the gang presence is so pervasive, Antonio Jr.’s parents put restrictions on him. When we asked him about his friends and hanging out, he replied,

I only have a few friends around here. Mostly they [parents] don’t let me go outside because of gangs.

Antonio Jr. is bused about seven miles to high school—outside the neighborhood where he lives. As a result, many of Antonio Jr.’s friends are not from his neighborhood. When Antonio Jr. asks them to come to his house to play basketball, his friends tell him,

No thanks. Every time they go down there [to the Hernandez neighborhood] it’s all crime. They don’t know about drive-bys and shots. . . . It’s scary for them because they are not used to it.

The neighborhood where Antonio Jr. lives has a reputation in the city. Outsiders of the community, including his friends, also view it as dangerous. One reason for the danger is the increase in tensions between the diverse populations.

Because of the ethnically mixed neighborhood, rival gangs often emerge from the same neighborhood. This segregation is not uncommon in multiracial communities (Phillips, 1999; Taylor, 1990; Vigil & Long, 1990; Waters, 1999). Antonio Jr. tells us that the Asian gangs have recently impacted his neighborhood:

The Asian gangs are the hardest one right now. Right now they have taken over the neighborhood, it’s mostly like if an Asian person, you know a guy, whatever, if he comes in here and he dresses a certain way, if he dresses, you
know, like a normal person, they don’t bother him. If he comes in like baggy
and everything, trying to, you know “I’m this and that” . . . they start causing
problems. Or sometimes they might just jump you because they want to.

Antonio Jr. is getting used to living in this dangerous neighborhood. He
summarizes just how accustomed to the activity he is:

Well, most of the time when I hear gunshots I don’t even duck.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Regardless of neighborhood conditions, family involvement is a criti-
cal force in the lives of adolescents. Antonio Sr. is clear on this point. Al-
though Rosa may know this to be true, she is unable, as a single mother, to
control her adolescent boys. And it is not surprising that, along with other
risk factors, living in a single-parent family may increase an adolescent’s
chances of joining a gang (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson,

The Valez family has struggled, facing poverty, paternal absence, and
family violence. Rosa and Pedro met and married in the United States
shortly after Rosa emigrated from Mexico. After approximately 18 years,
Rosa became a single parent when she permanently separated from Pedro.
His repeated violence and the family’s poor living conditions prompted
her to leave Pedro and raise the six children alone. Rosa discusses the fam-
ily’s experience with police intervention, including their ultimate eviction
from an apartment in South Central Los Angeles:

Well, they kicked us out. He [Pedro] gave me very little money for expenses
and since the children were small they used to wet their blankets. When the
police came that one time, there were a lot of wet (with urine) blankets and
dirty clothes. And, since I did the washing at home, instead of pictures
hanging I had the clothes hanging around the walls. The police said that was
not correct. I told them “What do you want me to do with the clothes I have
to wash? Because they go to school.” We were five plus my husband. They
said it was not right for us to live all piled up like that.

The problems at home were exacerbated by the fact that Pedro was abu-
sive toward her and the children. The family lived with violence in their
household, another predictor of gang involvement (Barker, 1998; Hill
et al., 1999; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Moore, 1978). As a result of the
violence, the police were called:
We were in court before for my oldest daughter [Ramona]. Her father hit her and she called the police and they separated us. Since he [Pedro] had been reported already because he used to hit me. One of my sisters reported him because I was [pregnant] . . . I was black and blue, all bruised they started checking. The police knew about him in regards to that. So they came and asked us to leave. They asked me if I wanted him sent to jail, because they wanted to send him away for five years, but I said I did not want anything against him, that the only thing I wanted was for him not to come near us. Well, now, since it has been four years, the judge told me I had to accept the fact that I had to see him because he has to see the kids. Either I take them to him or he comes to see them.

Since their separation, Pedro’s participation in the family has been minimal. He does not contribute financial resources to the family, and the children are without a male role model in the house. All family members feel Pedro’s absence.

In sharp contrast to Jorge’s family, Antonio Sr. and Marta are omnipresent. They take a strong stance on supervising their son and keeping him away from gangs. Antonio Sr. explains:

Yes, we try to be on top, advise him. We can’t do anything else, and up until now, sometimes because he sees so many things. Something catches his eye, perhaps the manner of dress of a schoolmate. He also noticed that gang members have money and a lot of girlfriends. He is at that age where he likes girls. This is a problem, but as I told you previously, thank God I have a beautiful family. We are very close and communicate and he understands.

Antonio Sr. continues to talk about the importance of parental supervision:

Sometimes I hear from my wife or my son or oldest daughter that so and so’s son hit his father, that he left home, that he shouted obscenities and it’s two or three in the morning and the parents don’t know where the kid is. How can it be possible for a minor to be out after 9:00 p.m. without the parents knowing where he is? That cannot be. Let me reiterate that if parents worried more about their kids, where they are, what they are doing. Because personally how can we relax watching TV or go to bed for the night if they [children] are out. It’s impossible. And you [kids] have to show us that we can trust you. Otherwise we can’t let you do anything. We will always be watching you.

Beyond advice, the control of Antonio Sr. moves to threats of action. He is going to be sure that he and his children understand one another. Antonio Sr. shares how communication is important to him:
I told Antonio Jr. and Lourdes, if you provoke me, if you do something that merits that I hit you, I’m going to hit you. If you call the police and they put me in jail, okay they’re going to put me in. But I get out I’m going to hit you again for doing it. For me to get to that point, it should be something very very extreme. I think the communication between the father and son is one of superiority. [If] I tell him “Do this or don’t do this,” I’m always going to tell him why. If you [son] think I’m wrong, if you convince me that I am wrong, I will accept it from you. But if I convince you that you are the one that’s wrong, you have to accept it. It’s not about that I am the leader of the house or that it has to be necessarily what I say or when I say. The things have to be done or the decisions need to be made in the manner in which you see them from your point of view from the criteria that should be forming.

The monitoring and control of the Hernandez family may partially explain why Antonio Jr. has stayed away from gang membership (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). The Hernandez’s supervision is in sharp contrast to the Valez family. When Jose Valez, Jorge’s younger brother, began to get into trouble with police, Jorge closely followed his delinquent actions. With Jorge’s actions, Rosa now had two young adolescent boys beginning gang-related activities. Rosa, a mother raising six children on her own, did not feel equipped to handle her unruly sons. The first time Jorge was arrested he was just about to turn 18. She let him remain in police custody during his trial rather than assuming responsibility for him. Rosa explains:

When they took him away, they told me that if I wanted to be responsible for him I could bring him home, but since he was turning 18, I knew he was not going to stay at home and I told the judge I would not be able to control him. Being of legal age, he would pay no attention to me.

Rosa felt badly that she could not assume custody of her son. It is often difficult for family members in such situations because the gang members, while involved in illegal activities, are still part of the family (Jankowski, 1991; Ruble & Turner, 2000). Families know that the youth are facing difficulties in the streets but nevertheless feel the need to defend their children. Rosa did not believe Jorge deserved to be taken into custody. She describes what happened prior to and after his arrest:

He [Jorge] was trying to defend his friend that was being harassed by some guys and he found it easy to defend him but they [the police] let his friend go and they arrested him. The only thing they said was that I had to get him away from the gangs.

Although Rosa knew she needed to intervene between her son and gangs, she seemed not to know how. And, unfortunately, Pedro was notably ab-
sent. When we asked Jorge about his relationship with his father, he appeared angry and unhappy:

Yeah, he used to be a business man.
Do you miss him?
Not me. We don’t talk to each other. We’re mad at each other. My dad used to child abuse us. He used to hit us.

The parental relationship is an important one in any family, but especially in an immigrant family. It is not uncommon for immigrant parents to lose status with their children (Waters, 1999). Children are adaptive to American culture, whereas many parents are not.

Jorge obviously feels distant from his father. Perhaps in an attempt to be a male role model in the home and compensate for his father’s absence, he attempts to insulate his younger brother from the violence and drugs he has encountered as a gang member. Jorge is fostering a protective big brother relationship with his 8-year-old brother, Juan. Jorge describes his advice to Juan:

Like sometimes I tell how, about drugs how do they make me feel. And I guess he don’t like it. You know, because he learned it from me. I don’t do drugs right now, but before when I used to do speed and everything I used to tell him I was. When I smoked the pipe I didn’t like it—it make me throw up. I used to tell him about the feeling. And then I told him look, crystal made me feel like this. I liked it, but it’s a very expensive drug. You know. And every time, like when he’s with me or something, if somebody is beating him up, I show him how to defend himself. I already got the weights [for weight lifting] for him, so he won’t say that he failed out because he didn’t have weights.

It is important that he foster this positive relationship because having a family association with gang membership is a strong predictor of becoming a gang member (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). Perhaps teaching his brother how to physically protect himself is one way Jorge hopes to prevent his brother from joining gangs. If Juan does not feel a need to join a gang for protection in the streets, he may be less inclined to join. Possibly, Jorge is trying to prevent the cycle because Jorge followed his brother into gangs. Jorge personally knows the potential for violence in the neighborhood and provides Juan with an alternative mechanism for protection [weight lifting] in hopes that he won’t turn to gangs.

The Hernandez family, in contrast to the Valez family, appears more cohesive. Both the strong family bond and the presence of both parents
in the home have been identified as factors that might discourage adolescent gang membership (Hill et al., 1999; Moore, 1978). The parents, Antonio Sr. and Marta, are married, and Antonio Jr. has two sisters living at home. Antonio Jr. is a protector of his younger siblings and his cousins who live nearby. Here, Antonio Jr. explains how he, like Jorge, serves a big brother role.

Well, we are loving, and we love each other and we protect each other. So if my sister ever gets in problems I’m always there . . . we stick together. Around here, people always try to pick on her. So anybody that’s bigger than her picks on her so I stick up for her. Some just do it to have fun. And they try to pick on the weakest person they can find. Those kinds of problems are the things that happen around here.

Antonio Jr. is also protective of his cousins who visit the neighborhood periodically. Sometimes they get into an altercation with a gang member. Antonio describes what happens:

Sometimes if it’s between him [cousin] and a gang, a gang member, we just leave it alone you know. Don’t talk to him [gang member] you know. If he starts pushing you around you know, just tell him you don’t want to fight.

Gang issues abound in these neighborhoods. Parents are constantly forced to intervene in the interactions between their children and the neighborhood. If this does not happen, the children are forced to fend for themselves. As a result, it may not be surprising that Jorge turned to gangs for protection, whereas Antonio Jr. did not.

Lack of parental support or control by parents is commonly found among parents of gang members (Hill et al., 1999; Lahey, Gordon, Loeb, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 1999; Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988). This is the case with the Valez family. Rosa was initially unaware of her son’s involvement in gangs and she didn’t personally understand why her adolescent sons turned to gangs, nor did she know how to intervene. This is not the case in the Hernandez family, whose teenage son is not a gang member. They closely monitor their children. Antonio Jr.’s parents feel they had a close call with him and gang activity. They appear savvy about watching for the signs of gang membership. The level of parental awareness and control is quite different in these two families. When we asked Rosa why she thought her sons turned to gangs, she replied,
I really don’t know. They said that they felt that they needed my husband around. And that because he sold vegetables [from a truck], he didn’t have a lot of time.

In contrast, Marta appears aware of her son:

One can always tell when a son is already hanging around with gang members. He starts dressing like them, he comes home late, he comes home with symptoms that he is taking something. We can tell because it happened with our son. When he went to Hoover (a local junior high school) and it was only one week, but one kid, Mexican American. My son told me one morning, “Mama I don’t want to go to school, I have stomach ache.” He complained over and over. I told him he had to go even if he had stomach ache. I’m going to give him some Pepto Bismol and go to school. So he left, but he played hooky with this other kid. On the weekend I found out what had happened because I saw the attendance slip that he had not been to school that day and they wanted my signature. But he never told me he had played hooky. I sensed something but I did not know what. Friday when I went to the laundry there he was there. I immediately hit him and when his father came home, he also hit him. I told him we are giving the best we can. Just because other kids want you to jump in a hole, you don’t have to do that. You have your own personality, your own way of thinking.

At all costs, even resorting to physical punishment, the Hernandez parents will control their son and steer him away from gangs. We wanted to find out Antonio Jr.’s impressions. We asked Antonio Jr., “What makes you different from everyone else? What keeps you out of gangs?” Antonio Jr. replied,

My dad. He scares me sometimes . . . because he tells me things he would probably do to me. So every time they ask me to be in a gang I always think of my dad’s face every time he speaks to me. It’s not like really being afraid of him bad, you know. Like, you know, sometimes he might get really disappointed in me if I got into a gang.

Lack of support and leadership from Jorge’s father, Pedro, has an impact on him. Because his mother struggles as a single parent raising six children with no emotional or financial support from her husband, her focus is not always on her adolescent sons. Researchers purport that in many cases, when families do not fulfill their parental role, the gang family takes over as a support mechanism (Phillips, 1999; Vigil & Long, 1990; Waters, 1999).
In contrast, the support, guidance, and control that Antonio Jr. receives may be enough, despite negative influences in his neighborhood, to keep him out of gangs. He does not want to let his parents down. Regardless of an adolescent male’s gang status, because of the communities in which he lives, interaction with gang members is not only possible, it is likely.

**INTERACTION WITH GANG ACTIVITY**

Neighborhood influences (e.g., safety and protection) and family factors (e.g., presence of father) influence gang membership. Ruble & Turner (2000) suggest that the two things most likely to affect and be affected by gangs are community and neighborhood. Gangs are integrally linked to the cities and streets in which these families live. Whether the male adolescent is in a gang or not, he certainly has knowledge about gangs. And, despite the families’ wishes or desires, some contact with gangs is inevitable.

We first wanted to better understand the adolescent view of gangs. We asked Antonio if it is hard for him to tell who is in a gang and who is not. Antonio Jr. replied,

No. Not really. Just by the way they walk, they dress, or sometimes they just, well, you can tell. Once you live around here you get to tell who is a gang member. They dress in really really baggy clothes, baggy baggy . . . having your pants all the way down below your waist . . . sometimes you can tell by the way they all cut their hair. A specific gang has like a . . . some are bald, some have like a little trim, and most of the time some have long hair.

Antonio Jr. told us he had friends in gangs:

In junior high, most of the friends I had weren’t in a gang. And last year when we got into high school, most of them, like half of my friends were. And by this time, probably I would say five of my friends aren’t in a gang.

Having friends in gangs has been identified as an indicator of gang membership (Lahey et al., 1999; Ruble & Turner, 2000). Given that Antonio Jr. had friends both in and out of gangs, we wondered if his gang friends tried to pressure him into joining. He replied,

No they never tried that. I had a friend around here and he already got jumped in but he’s never asked me. I know I’m going to be pressured at some time. I’ve been pressured at school. There is, like this new crew called
the “GGs” Groovy Greasers. And my friend was in it and at first he started pressuring me like you know, get in it or probably since you are my friend, I might just get like five guys on you. You know, like five guys jump me in [physically force him to join].

Antonio Jr., on entering high school, managed to steer clear of gang membership. In contrast, Jorge left an ROTC-type program at an earlier age, in junior high school, just to join gangs. His mother, Rosa, explains,

> When he was younger, he was going [to ROTC]. . . . He has the Marine uniform. He was in that. But suddenly he got out and simply to be in the gang. He no longer wanted to return [to the ROTC program].

Jorge confesses that he joined, in part, because he was harassed:

> I was going to regular school, but them gang related guys kept sweating me and I kept fighting with them. I didn’t want to be a gang banger, they forced me. But then a lot of things went wrong and I guess I decided to jump in [join the gang].

Gangs are one way of protecting oneself and the family from the dangerous community (Omizo et al., 1997; Ruble & Turner, 2000; Taylor, 1990; Vigil, 1988). In some ways, as suggested by Joe & Chesney-Lind (1995), “the gang is a haven for coping with the many problems they encounter in their everyday life in marginalized communities” (p. 426).

Antonio Jr. does not feel this need for protection. He seems to have found a way to peacefully coexist with gang members in his neighborhood. Antonio Jr. states,

> Around here I know most of the guys now because I live around here and I talk to them so I know them. So if they see me and sometimes . . . if I make them [his pants] loose they come down some more . . . most of the time I don’t like wearing my shirt inside as you can tell because it is uncomfortable and I put it on top. And if I walk down the street, they won’t say anything to me, they just say “What’s up what’s going on?” you know. But if it’s somebody else like my cousins, they don’t know them. If they see me walking with them they tell me, “Is he ok?”

Antonio Jr. feels his friends join gangs not for protection but because they like the power and status that comes with gang association. Both a sense of esteem and protection have been noted as reasons why adolescents join gangs (Moore, 1978; Taylor, 1990; Vigil, 1988). Antonio Jr. explains why he thinks his friends join gangs:
I think they just want to feel wanted, popular you know. In a gang I can do this and that. And I think they just probably want to be in a gang because of that. And most of them are smart. They do good in school.

Antonio Jr., despite the strict parental control he receives, has briefly considered gang membership. The temptation is there, particularly because Antonio Jr. has friends who are gang members. We asked Antonio Jr. if he ever thought about joining. He replied,

I did for a while, but then I looked at a friend because he got jumped by some other crew. He got jumped and I looked at his face, how it looked after the fight. And he had bruises everywhere you know, and it’s something I don’t want. Just getting jumped by anyone because the way you dress or look.

Getting “jumped in” refers to the joining of a gang. This ritual almost always involves the physical beating of the new member by existing members (Atkins, 1996; Jankowski, 1991; Phillips, 1999; Ruble & Turner, 2000; Vigil, 1988; Vigil & Long, 1990). It is a rite of passage, a way for the new person to prove his loyalty and show how “tough” and “macho” he is. Antonio Jr. describes what he knows about jumping in:

There is a lot of things. You can go to another gang [member] and beat him up. You have to beat him up. If you don’t, you don’t pass. Or sometimes, like these gangs around here, you have to kill someone before you get jumped in.

Why would a young man want to go through this torturous ritual? Jorge put it simply:

Let’s say three of them fight, and three of them die, and they jump in. That’s them. They like us. We’re the biggest gang and we’re only Latino . . . [we’re called] East Side Longos.

When we asked Jorge what it was about gang banging that was attractive he replied,

It’s fun. It’s just like living a normal life. You know.

For him, the activity and involvement was normal. Perhaps it was a way to escape boredom, as researchers have proposed (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). He enjoyed spending time with his friends, particularly his gang friends. In fact, gangs prefer their members to be friends with fellow
gang members (Ruble & Turner, 2000). Jorge talked about his “home-boys” and the reality and consequences of this “fun” behavior. Physical injury, getting shot, and the loss of gang friends are a casualty of this lifestyle. Jorge explains:

Things happen to you. But see, I’m in gang banging that’s why. It’s normal for a gang banger to get shot. I could have ran, but you know. Like, we prove to one another that, that you know, we’re down for each other. We won’t let each other down. I already know who’s down with me. Certain people I don’t trust, certain I trust. All the homeboys that I grew up with. Like the ones that I knew, there’s still a lot of new guys and everything. And probably other homeboys I never met. But the ones that I grew up with, they died all. They all died through gang wars. I lost them in gang wars. And some of ’em are in jail. I’m like the only one outside. There’s one other one outside, but he don’t mess around no more. Well, he don’t want to, he works at [a local fast food restaurant]. His ex-girlfriend had a baby. She lives upstairs. She has a baby from my homeboy. My homeboy got with her when I got locked up. Yeah. She told me she still likes me. I was like this, she has me shy. She told me in front of her mom. I used to like her a lot.

Death is a real consequence for gang members. Even though Antonio Jr. is not in a gang, he is also very aware of this reality. Antonio Jr. eloquently explains:

I know that if I get into a gang, probably by the age of 25, I’ll probably be dead . . . because once you’re in, if one crew has a problem with another crew and you get in, you don’t know the problems they have. Just because you are from that gang, they kill you. If you join in, you are part of the problem.

Antonio Jr., it seems, sees the big picture. He recognizes that being a gang member contributes to the neighborhood and societal problems. He is also realistic about the potential for violence and death. Despite the real potential for death among gang members, there are times when gang members form alliances and negotiate peace treaties (Phillips, 1999). Antonio Jr. told us of a recent peace treaty that had been in effect for the past few months. Antonio Jr. explains:

I’ve seen it get better. . . . Well, since I talked to my friend, you know, they have a peace treaty right now. And, you know, nobody can kill anyone. No gang member can kill another gang member or any person. And the problems, you know, have been decreased.

We confirmed this at a community gang prevention meeting, attended by researchers and translators. We learned about recent activity in the gang
community. We also learned more about how gang members can get out of a gang. “Jumping out” of a gang is not easy. There is not a natural progression, or “maturing out,” of gang membership (Hagedorn, 1994; Lasley, 1992). Jorge provided an example of his friend, a former gang member who is now a father. This friend now has a legitimate reason to leave the gang. The excuse of fatherhood is accepted and respected by gang members (Atkins, 1996; Barker, 1998; Vigil & Long, 1990). Barker (1998) noted that fatherhood provides a new, alternative purpose in life. Jorge talked about when he might get out of gangs:

Well actually [turning 20 years old] ain’t going to make me stop. What’s going to make me stop probably is having a kid. . . . That’s why I told you [next year], probably around this time I get a girl pregnant, I hope not. I don’t want to. I don’t got no money to support it. . . . I don’t want to live by welfare. Like I told you. Hopefully if I start working, I got the job application out there, I’m go for another one at the warehouse. If I get the job, [I can earn] about 1500 dollars. Then I’m going to give my mom, probably like 700 [dollars].

Jorge has hopes and dreams for his future. Although he is not a father yet, Jorge said lately he has been staying home and withdrawing from gang life:

I’ve been staying home for the last couple of days. It keeps me out of trouble. I got bored being with the homeboys. We do the same thing every day. I’m not around no more. I’ve been staying out of trouble lately because, well, I’ve been slowing down. But right now, to tell you the truth right now, I considered myself a hard core gang banger when I got out of jail. I don’t consider myself a hard core gang banger now.

The end of gangs for Jorge may be coming. He says he is slowing down, maybe even getting tired of it. He claims he may soon quit. However, finding an accepted excuse to leave is difficult. As he mentioned, becoming a father may provide a way out. Antonio Jr., at the end of our interviews, was still not a gang member.

The lives of Jorge and Antonio Jr. provide two contrasting pictures of life in low-income, ethnically diverse urban communities. The multiple influences of neighborhood, family, and gangs on the adolescents’ daily lives are evident throughout the interviews.
CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Gaining an understanding of issues in the neighborhood and family helps researchers recognize the multiple marginalities faced by young adolescent males living in urban areas (Phillips, 1991; Vigil, 1988). Multiple crises can cause confusion in the life of an adolescent. A complex relationship exists between adolescents, gangs, family, and neighborhoods. The impact of neighborhoods and family on adolescents is important. In this article, the impact of gangs, family, and neighborhoods was studied. Two Mexican American adolescent males in similar, adjacent, poor, urban neighborhoods wrestle with negative influences in their daily lives. In these two cases, the interactions and outcomes provide a contrasting picture of urban street life.

The community in which youth are raised provides the environment in which they operate. When these neighborhoods are poor, violent, and unsafe, gang activity is often an outcome. Gangs are frequently the product of distressed neighborhoods and families. In many cases, gangs meet the needs of adolescents whose needs are not being met by traditional institutions (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). When economic opportunities do not present themselves in these poor neighborhoods, the gang option is seen by many as an alternate way of obtaining power, money, and protection (Stone, 1999).

Trying to be safe in simple activities, such as walking to the store or going to school, can become difficult. To keep safe, and without direction and support from his parents, Jorge felt the need to join a gang. Jorge was a product of his environment. Antonio Jr., perhaps largely due to his parental support, was able to navigate his environment yet not fall victim to it.

The importance of family and peer relations in the lives of adolescents is well documented (Adams et al., 1994; Barker, 1998; Lahey et al., 1999; Wetzel, 1987). In cases in which recently immigrated parents do not embrace the new (American) culture, they may lose the respect of their children. When these children are not monitored and supported by their parents, gang membership becomes more attractive. The situation may be exacerbated when the family structure breaks down, through divorce or separation of the parents. With only one parent in the home, typically the mother, control over children, especially adolescent males, may become more challenging. As an example, Rosa did not appear able to maintain respect from and control over her sons.
Joining a gang seems to be one mechanism, albeit a dangerous one, for an adolescent to find both family fulfillment and protection. Jorge views his gang peers as brothers and a means of keeping safe because family and police help was not forthcoming. Two important factors contributing to his gang involvement, according to Jorge and his mother Rosa, are the absence of his father and the need for physical protection on the streets.

In contrast, Antonio Jr., under strict supervision from and threats by his parents, seems to have found a way to negotiate his neighborhood without joining a gang. In part, he may have worked hard to find a solution to dealing with neighborhood violence, while not joining a gang and while meeting the demands of his parents.

Jorge’s situation follows the lines of traditional gang research. Based on past research on indicators of gang membership, he faces multiple negative influences. Jorge is from a violent, broken home where police intervention has occurred, is being raised by a single mother who is unable to control him, has a brother who joined gangs first, and lives in a violent neighborhood where protection in the streets is necessary. Antonio Jr., in comparison, is beating the odds thus far. Although facing some of the same negative neighborhood influences that Jorge faces, Antonio Jr. has controlling, married parents and no family legacy of gang membership. And although Antonio Jr. lives in an unsafe neighborhood, he is bused to a safer neighborhood for school, where he successfully stays out of gangs despite the fact that many of his friends have joined. It seems one of the most important factors in his decision is the influence of his parents, particularly his father. His parents have been able to overcome the neighborhood conditions and keep their son safe from gangs. He seems to have worked around the street safety issue, being able to traverse the streets safely by successfully interacting with but not joining gangs.

The future of both Jorge and Antonio Jr. is uncertain. Jorge recognizes the need to leave gang life for a safer, more productive future. He looks forward to obtaining gainful employment and perhaps becoming a father. Antonio Jr. told us he wants to go to college to study engineering. If these two young men can overcome their dangerous neighborhoods and focus on positive family support, they may have a chance at a successful future.

This article, using qualitative methods, revealed the lives of two adolescent males, their families, and their neighborhoods. An ethnographic investigation is an excellent way to gain insight into the lives of low-income, immigrant families living in urban communities. Although in-depth interviews with two families, including two male adolescents, certainly does not provide a complete and generalizable picture about influences on gang activity, other studies can help expand the knowledge base. More method-
ologically rigorous, qualitative studies can continue our understanding of
the multiple influences that poor, urban, immigrant families face on a
daily basis.

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