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Practitioner's Essay

Asian Americans on the Streets:
Strategies for Prevention and Intervention

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Abstract

Notably lacking in the literature on Vietnamese and Cambodian youth gangs in the United States and particularly Southern California have been solutions that address the underlying causative factors of gang involvement. Relying on life histories collected over a span of fifteen years, the authors propose a multi-faceted prevention and intervention strategy that includes the community and schools to heighten cultural awareness for children and parents. It is also recommended that policies take into account nuanced differences between Asian communities and bring together multiple stakeholders including officials and hard-core gang members to improve communicative problems that have resulted in gang-policy failures.

Introduction

One key policy concern regarding Asian American adaptation to the U.S. involves problems with youth groups, especially street gangs. This practitioners' essay will address the subject of Asian American street gangs with an emphasis on prevention and intervention strategies for policymakers and direct social service providers. While we do not discount the importance of gender in responding to the gang problem, we concentrate on troubled male youth as the focus of this essay. In addition to assessing policy-relevant research findings with respect to this population, we have drawn from firsthand individual life histories to contextualize our interpretations within the particular social experiences and cultural realities of gang youth.

The Asian American street gang problem has mushroomed since the immigrant community attained critical mass after 1965.

Although still a relatively small portion of all street gangs nationwide (data from the National Youth Gang Center taken from 1999-2001 stated that Asian American gang members account for only 3% to 6% of the gang population), research on Asian American groups has offered important insights into the causative factors of gang involvement (Curry 1996; Hunt, Joe et al. 1997; Long 1996, 1997; Nguyen 1982; Vigil and Yun 1990, 1996, 2002). Notably lacking, however, are writings that articulate concrete solutions. In the works that focus on prevention and intervention strategies (see, e.g., Clarke 1995; Goldstein and Huff 1993; Gottfredson 1986; Rosenbaum 1992; Tolan and Gorman-Smith 1998), none of them considers the particular characteristics of the Asian American experience.

It is crucial that the unique cultural and adaptive characteristics of these immigrant groups provide a factual basis for the programmatic aspects of any policy strategy. For example, Vietnamese tend to fear crime more than whites, yet, like so many other Asian Americans, refuse to publicly acknowledge certain types of crime problems in their own midst (Lane and Meeker 2004). In their view, exposure of delinquent behavior will reflect badly on the group as a whole. If, as is commonly held, Asian communities value certain modes of conformity—and this is a point that practitioners must ascertain within their own particular communities—then it is important for policymakers to assess how these values interact with assimilation processes to produce delinquent tendencies.

Theoretical Framework

In previous research, the senior author has introduced a multidimensional, interdisciplinary framework to highlight various factors that are vital for understanding street gangs (Vigil 1988, 2002, 2003; Vigil and Yun 2002). These factors include ecological, economic, social, cultural, and psychological phenomena. In this model, the disruptive experiences of the immigration experience and adjustment to American urban life form the basis for comprehending the maladaptation missteps that give rise to street gangs. There are multiple domains in which immigrants' children find themselves "betwixt-and-between," and ultimately subordinated to mainstream society. Such areas include the physical locations where they settle, the types of jobs families fill, and the uneasy reception of social and cultural values and practices within a dominant social order.

This multiple marginality model elaborates on the reciprocal actions and reactions among adaptation factors to show how the ill effects of culture conflict undergo processes of mutual reinforcement. In this essay, we wish to focus our attention on the ways in which miscommunication amplifies the disruptions of immigrant adjustment on multiple planes, ranging from communication on the level of individuals to communication between institutions. For example, lower-income and working class Asian Americans are more likely to be concentrated in certain neighborhoods and isolated from mainstream institutions.

Our policy recommendations are based upon the holistic orientation of this framework. Indeed, we believe that a textured understanding of the interwoven nature of micro- and macro-processes is not merely an academic, theoretical nicety; rather, it helps practitioners to tailor their responses to the particular needs of very different population areas, and the very different individuals who inhabit them. We urge those in the field who deal with Asian American families to approach their work with a careful attentiveness to factors that, while seemingly ambiguous in their effects, play important roles in shaping individual identities.

Distinct Experiences of Asian American Adaptation

The changing roles and customs of Asians in America engender a great deal of strain in family life, which if not settled produces crises of social identity for youths. In traditional Vietnamese life, for example, the prescribed role of the father included assuming the position of head of the family unit, exercising responsibility for major economic decisions, and maintaining family traditions. The mother, on the other hand, generally stayed at home and tended to the children, maintaining a level of harmony within the household. Children were expected to have the utmost respect for age-based gender hierarchies; young children were taught to respect their older siblings as well as their parents.

Once in the U.S., however, Vietnamese families were hard-pressed to make these customs applicable to their children. In fact, life in America seemed to require insurmountable changes in family expectations and gender roles. In the U.S., the level of financial support that a father alone could provide was usually insufficient to support the large, extended families that lived under the same roof under traditional culture. As a result, the mother had to share

the responsibility of providing financial assistance and had to seek work. Fathers now were forced into an unfamiliar role, reluctantly sharing the housework chores in contradiction to customary practices. Furthermore, the values of gender equality in America, for good or bad, have contributed to the subversion of the traditional patriarchy. A Vietnamese father of three children stated:

> When my two sons were young, they were forbidden to enter the kitchen to cook or clean. My wife was responsible for the duties in the kitchen. It is not a man's job to cook or clean. It is his job to provide for the family. Now, twenty years later, I do most of the cooking and cleaning. My wife works six days a week from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The frustrating changes in cultural expectations, generational traditions, and gender roles have caused parents to place increasing demands on first- and second-generation Asian American youth. Sensing the disruption of their values, many parents have insistently maneuvered to instill traditional values in their children, urging them to resist Americanization and the devaluation of their cultural practices. However, the change in family roles, coupled with the pervasive influence of American culture, creates conflict in the formation of social and personal identity. Under these constraints some youths completely reject their parents' culture, while others reject American identity in negative reaction to racial discrimination and language barriers (Zhou and Lee 2004). This tension produces a strain in familial relationships, further undermining social and personal identity formation (Vigil and Yun 1990). Even in a community that is rich in cultural traditions, such as Little Saigon in Southern California, schools can additionally act as secondary social agents to put tremendous pressure on Vietnamese youth to become Americanized.

Some children find that gangs offer a space of cultural hybridity in which conflicting elements are reconciled and role assignments are somewhat clarified. In this case, the gang's syncretic blending of cultural influences makes it an effective "holding pattern" while youth continue to contend with issues of social identity. Thus, the very same customs and traditions that children reject at home may, ironically, be recycled within the gang, though in fragmented and piecemeal form. When Vietnamese youths come to counterpose the family's adaptive struggles to the gang's appar-

ent ability to negotiate cultural inconsistencies, there occurs a deterioration of the family unit as the primary form of social control.

Another strain on the family unit, especially between parents and their first- or second-generation children, is the family's strict demand for academic success. Many immigrant parents experience a heightened sense of urgency to make something out of their lives by providing their children with opportunities not available in their home country (Suarez-Orozco 2001). Often, this translates into an emphasis on scholastic achievement. This inclination is reinforced in Asian American communities by strict Confucian values emphasizing filial piety and the ideal of the perfect moral individual. As children attempt to deal with these contending demands while struggling to shape their own identity, poor schooling experiences may further push certain youth toward gang involvement.

By now, it is well-accepted that the "model minority" stereotype of seamless transition and scholastic success fails to account for the significant number of individuals who resist conventional norms (Lee 1996). One interesting development to underscore is the ability of some children to straddle two worlds and maintain the image of both "street boy" and "schoolboy." Our data shows that those who do well in school and hang out with troubled youth rarely become the hard-core gang members responsible for the majority of gang-related offenses. These uniquely resilient individuals have simply learned how to strike a balance between their family, other obligations, and academic responsibilities, while at the same time engaging in esteem-boosting outlets that contravene mainstream behaviors. However, it is important to note that these individuals are seldom fully immersed into one lifestyle or the other; they are not hard-core gang members, but neither are they valedictorians. For such individuals, a relationship with the gang is more of a self-gratifying venture, a type of picking and choosing of the gang customs that suit them. The same applies for their involvement in academic life.

Policy Implications

In order to develop effective prevention and intervention programs aimed at troubled Asian American youth, policymakers must account for factors such as historical experience, cultural tradition and dissonance, assimilation obstacles, and family dy-

namics. As a case in point, the senior author once evaluated a gang prevention program named Lights of the Cambodian Family, which served a Long Beach Cambodian community by attempting to address various risk factors for gang membership. The target population included five-year-old children in kindergarten at two elementary schools and their family members. Because cultural ambiguities marked the experiences of the older, gang-involved siblings that many of these children had, the program sought to provide grounding for Cambodian-American identity by offering cultural awareness and language instruction, stressing the positive qualities of Cambodian traditions. Twice a week near the end of the school day for one hour, two Cambodian teachers came to instruct the children. In addition, program staff met with the parents of the same children twice a month to discuss the progress of their children's education, and whether the parents were able to better communicate and guide them at home. Parenting strategies were also discussed at the sessions. In sum, cultural awareness and language training were components designed to enable better communication and mutual understanding between parents and children. These tactics helped to close the cultural gap by encouraging parents to consider new and creative childrearing approaches.

The key features of this program can serve as an example and conduit of ways to increase dialogue among all parties. Since the older Cambodian children had already taken a destructive path, parents were more disposed to listen to advice and consider a discussion about what went wrong and how. From this opening of being more approachable to help the younger children avoid following in the footsteps of their older siblings, parents were then willing to explore the different histories each generation (i.e., first the parents, then the older children, and finally, the younger children) experienced and when prevention and intervention might have been an option for developmental problem areas. Cultural norms, customs, and traditions would naturally flow from such exchanges, opening the door to the dynamics of family life generally with specific examples for certain individuals. While learning from each other in this dialogue, the next step is for parents and children to take the initiative in making sure public institutions that have the power to instill cultural and ethnic pride and linguistic appreciation do so. This is especially the case with schools, where this type of assertive attitude and practice is what character-

izes being American: raise questions, seek answers, and strive for solutions.

Similarly, the Asian community must be involved in promoting programs that heighten awareness, both for parents and their troubled youth, of the potential miscues that may arise from the adaptation experience. Polices and approaches that neglect these factors miss a crucial area that underlies many motivations for gang involvement. The question, then, is how to develop specific kinds of policies that are tailored to the unique historical and cultural traits of the various Asian American groups.

Although we are mindful of the fact that the acculturation and assimilation dynamics of Asian Americans do vary drastically (not only between Asian groups, but also between geographical locales and even across generations), we believe that one observation may be particularly useful for thinking about Asian American gang policy. Specifically, we believe that many of the societal and familial failures that contribute to the development of gangs are often related to misinformation. This may take the form of deliberate miscommunications, accidental misunderstandings, unquestioned assumptions, and dismissed ambiguities.

It is certainly true that communicative issues figure centrally in gang-related problems no matter what ethnic group one is talking about. The media, for example, plays no small part in sensationalizing gang culture and spreading fear based on mischaracterizations and stereotypes. However, we would like to draw special attention not only to the narratives of youths themselves (see Heath and McLaughlin 1993), but also to different *non-verbal* forms of communication that are important in many Asian American cultures. When youths are exposed to the more outspoken manners of expression in mainstream American culture, contradictory modes of communication create great potential for confusion and culture conflict. More than half of the youth respondents indicated that when their parents were angry, communication virtually ceased within their household. One interviewee commented that when he saw his non-Asian friends feuding with their parents, these adults tended to express their anger clearly in such a way that "it was obvious that they cared about their family." The implication, of course, was that by remaining silent, his own parents did not care about him.

As noted earlier, the misunderstandings between parents and

children with regard to what parents expect and what their kids can reasonably achieve growing up in American society is a significant source of strain. One thirty-year-old Vietnamese American noted that his family life was fraught with problems regarding what his parents expected out of his brothers and sisters and what they could possibly achieve. His parents had expected straight A's, contribution to the family business, completion of household chores, and unquestioned obedience. Our respondent noted that he developed a deep sense of resentment, because he was left with no time to socialize with friends or engage in any sports or other after-school activities. When he resisted his responsibilities, his parents would resort to aggressive discipline that further strained the family relationship. During an interview, he stated:

> My dad retired early so that me, my brothers and sisters can work hard so we can pretty much pay the mortgage. My *moms* works on the grind on the assembly line so everybody works harder so we can help her out. They expected a lot out of us. All the other kids were having fun while we were supposed to help it with the family business and doing homework all day. It was bullshit!

Granted, many policymakers, scholars, and local leaders do pay lip service to a general need for better understanding of "immigrant cultures." Nevertheless, these observers and opinion-setters all too often conceive of these communities in terms of essentialized stereotypes based on the assumption that ethnic communities are static, homogeneous entities. Unsurprisingly, the resulting policies fall flat and sometimes even wreaked disastrous effects. We propose instead a systematic understanding of the multiple groups of stakeholders who stand to gain from more nuanced, on-the-ground knowledge about particular communities. These stakeholders include gang kids themselves, local leaders, law enforcement, regular citizens, and anyone who would benefit from peace in the community.

Consequently, the policies we suggest are geared toward improving flows of information between specific sets of actors. In our view, the most significant relations that policy-minded analysts must take notice of must be conceptualized on a micro-to-macro spectrum: 1) parents' relation to their children, 2) children and parents' relation to the ethnic community and its distinctive

institutions, 3) children and parents' relation to mainstream society and its norm-generating institutions (schools, churches, law enforcement), and 4) the ethnic community's relation to mainstream society. We consider each of these in turn.

First, it is extremely crucial to examine the various styles in which parents of different Asian American groups interact with their children. Outsiders often view the parenting practices of Asian Americans as alternatively ineffective, authoritarian, insensitive, or outright abusive. Many immigrant parents consider physical discipline a normal method of controlling behavior. It is thus not surprising that all of our subjects have noted either one form or another of physical discipline. One Korean interviewee noted that as a child, he always knew when he was going to be whipped with large chopsticks. To prepare himself for the punishment he would wear three to four layers of underwear and pretend to cry during his punishment. Another interviewee, a 28-year-old Cambodian now attending junior college, stated that he has utter disdain for his parents' abusive disciplinary style and even blames his parents for his past involvement with gangs. His parents expected him to maintain academic excellence while forbidding him to have any non-school related friends. The few friends that he did have were "friends that studied with me," and his parents often punished him physically if he spent time with other children.

Outsiders tend to interpret their own role in problem situations in terms of a rescue operation, where their job is to "save" the children from bad parenting. In addition, some forms of intervention involve "saving" the parents as well from practices perceived to be backwards. However, many parents resent the one-way, direct imposition of Western cultural values on matters that they believe to lie within a sphere of privacy. For example, one Korean parent mentioned that her resentment of this imposition led her to enforce a rigidly-defined sense of "Korean identity" in her family—an act that in turn generated resentment in her child.

By trying instead to attain more than a superficial understanding of the cultural context within which Asian American parents deal with their children, policymakers can apply a more grounded understanding of specific situations to better fine-tune their responses. Furthermore, Asian American parents, like anyone, will tend to appreciate gestures of communication much more than dictated impositions. Although some parents may interpret reach-out ef-

forts as an intrusion into family affairs, policymakers should make clear that they are committed to providing resources that parents can embrace to further the best interests of their child. Moreover, it should be made clear that policy responses are not intended to pronounce judgment on parenting skills.

Second, policymakers often fail to realize the subtle dynamics that are involved in different actors' relations to the ethnic community. As mentioned above, some Vietnamese express greater fear of crime within their own ethnic communities than others do in mainstream society. Vietnamese gang members tend to commit crimes against members of their own ethnic group; yet, their parents may be intimately connected to the Vietnamese American community at large. Moreover, the various institutions upon which the ethnic community is founded—self-help organizations, religious institutions, and other formal and informal sources of socialization—may incur different responses and levels of participation from parents and children. Policymakers must be careful to investigate the divisions that may affect any given location. Better understanding and comprehension is not only the first step toward eliminating fear. It is also a necessary move for engendering a collective sense that gang members should not be singled out as a "floating" problem, but should themselves be viewed as an inseparable part of the community itself.

Third, it is vital that there be better understandings of parents' and children's interactions with mainstream society and its institutions. It is a liberal mantra that dominant American perceptions often misconstrue ethnic parenting practices and children's responses to mainstream socialization processes (Renteln 2004). Less emphasized, however, but equally as important, are the ways in which Asian American children and parents themselves develop misunderstandings and their own essentializing, homogenizing comprehension of American culture. Particularly telling is the one subject's description of his parents' view of the American education system. The subject noted that his father would constantly say that the American education system "is easy" and that the "numerous opportunities in America" should result in nothing less than success for their children. According to the interviewee, his father told him, "If given the opportunity you have, I would be a lawyer or a doctor, but I had to fight for my country." Without a more informed view of the many ways in which individuals can stand

betwixt and between different worlds, policy responses are likely to speak to "problems" that are in reality only misperceptions.

Finally, in addition to focusing on relations from the perspective of individual agents, it is equally important to acquire a more macro, holistic impression of relations between communities at large. The tensions or harmonies that characterize the interactions between ethnic communities and elements of mainstream society are important contextualizing factors that must figure centrally into any policy decision. Thus, the multiple marginality framework calls for a conscious elaboration of the connections between individual, micro-scale processes and broader, macro-historical events. Did members of a particular Cambodian community, for example, arrive in the United States as refugees or as voluntary immigrants? Was the local reception welcoming or hostile? Have the attitudes of the parties involved changed substantially over time? How did these attitudes play out in official political circles as well as in the everyday life on the streets?

One obvious consequence of our approach to policymaking is that every stakeholder becomes a potential policymaker. In order to strive for increased dialogue and more powerful communicative practices, everyone from the highest official to the most hardcore gang member must be open to the possibility of better understanding. One Korean respondent lamented that he felt his parents made no attempt to understand him. His mother, in turn, mentioned that school authorities seemed to have no interest in trying to understand the particular challenges that she faced, and only cared to blame her for "being a bad parent." In short, one person's failure to be receptive to other perspectives can trigger a chain of misunderstandings.

Our policymaking philosophy resists top-down, "official" impositions of policy change, and instead embraces genuinely organic, grassroots efforts to change the community from within. One might even view gangs themselves as their own type of informal grassroots organization. If this is true, then it only makes sense that the internal sources of motivation that lead to the formation and persistence of gangs must become the internal sources of motivation that change gangs from the inside. Gang members must begin to view themselves as part of a broader community, and they can only do so if that community is willing to accept them as its own.

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