

# Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media

Chris Melde • Frank Weerman  
Editors

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 Springer

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# Introduction

Twenty years ago, a group of researchers founded the “Eurogang Program of Research,” a loosely knit network of researchers and policymakers concerned with gangs and troublesome youth groups across the globe<sup>1</sup>. It evolved out of attempts from American researchers to determine and document the existence of gangs in Europe (Klein, 1996; see for a short overview of the history of this group, Maxson & Esbensen, 2016). It includes not only European but also American researchers as well as several researchers from other parts of the world. The Eurogang Program of Research is now an official working group of the European Society of Criminology, with a primary goal of fostering collaborative efforts to conduct multisite, multi-method, comparative research on street gangs. The network developed common gang definitions and instruments that can be utilized in local contexts around the world, and has held numerous workshops and meetings, on an almost yearly basis. This sustained effort has produced a number of collaborative publications, including edited books and peer-reviewed journal articles that are widely cited by authors conducting gang-focused research in numerous countries.

This chapter introduces the sixth edited volume of contributions from the Eurogang network. Research presented in this volume stems primarily from works presented at the 17th and 18th Eurogang workshops, held on the campus of Michigan State University in 2017 and across both Erasmus University in Rotterdam and a conference center in Almen, the Netherlands, in 2018. Together, these workshops focused on factors associated with modern street gangs, on gang desistance and interventions, and on how gangs and gang members are influenced by their local context. A common theme that emerged across these two workshops, however, was on the connection between the internet, social media, and street gangs. From previous research, it was clear that gangs and gang members are at least as active online as are other same-age groups and youths (see, e.g., Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule, 2015). However, the presentations and discussions emanating from the recent Eurogang meetings moved well beyond whether and if gangs are present on social

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<sup>1</sup>For more information on The Eurogang Project, go to <https://eurogangproject.com/>.

media to more substantive discussions on how best to use the Internet and social media as a medium for research and the potential consequences of online activities for interpersonal relationships and gang activities. There is much to be learned by gang researchers about the nature of online content, how best to collect and analyze such information, and how the creation and dissemination of online materials influences people and their “real world” activities.

## **Gangs and the Rise of Social Media**

Diffusion of internet-based technologies of communication have significantly reshaped the social landscape in a matter of a decade. Roughly 45 percent of the world’s population report access to a smartphone (Newzoo, 2019). Time spent online among teens in the USA, for instance, doubled between 2006 and 2016 (Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg, 2019), with nearly 95% of US teens reporting access to a smartphone (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Ownership of smartphones among those ages 16 to 24 in the United Kingdom has gone from 29 percent in 2008 to 96 percent in 2019 (Ofcom, 2019), with similar rates of ownership across most western industrialized nations. Access to the Internet and social media is now available to most segments of society in advanced countries, suggesting the influence of the Internet and social media is no longer segmented along socio-economic lines or geographically in many regions.

As might be expected with any technological advance, street gangs and their members have made use of these advances, in part to advance their “brand” and propagate their activities. In what has been referred to as “internet banging” (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013), gang members commonly use social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) to express and promote their gang membership. While the medium for this content is relatively new, with content more easily shared across a larger, worldwide audience, the common themes emanating from these productions are largely akin to the messages gangs and their members promulgated through local graffiti, music, and gossip of days gone by. Gangs continue to signal to others, including their rivals, that they are tough, unafraid of violence, and are successful in lucrative illicit markets. Public reactions to these messages are predictably negative, and many fear that the easy accessibility, long reach, and permanence of the messages shared across social media platforms may enhance the already negative influences gangs can have on society by stoking greater interpersonal conflict and tensions between criminal organizations that may impact innocent civilians. Of course, the actual influence of “internet banging” on changes in actual violence is far from settled empirically. Given the potential for the Internet and social media to alter communication strategies and relationships within and between gangs, it brings forth serious questions pertaining to the study of street gangs and their activities.

The role of the Internet and social media as a public platform may have ramifications for the identification and study of street gangs with respect to The Eurogang

Project. After all, the Eurogang definition of a street gang, which states that “a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, *street-oriented* youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Weerman, Maxson, Esbensen, Aldridge, Medina, and van Gemert, 2009: 20), makes little room for purely online groups to fall under the street gang label. In particular, groups currently considered as street gangs under this definitional criterion must be “street-oriented,” in that they frequently congregate in public settings. How does the Internet and social media factor into public behavior? Do changes in the routine activity patterns of youth and young adults more generally, who now spend growing hours of the day on the Internet and social media have implications for how frequently street gangs hang out on the street, in parks, in cars, or other public settings, and ultimately have implications for what we consider street gangs? More directly, can the Internet and social media be considered “public behavior?” If so, how do we factor this into our methods of research to understand street gangs and their associated behaviors?

Members of the Eurogang network have spent considerable time debating this topic and its ramifications for research and the instruments that have been developed by this group (see the Eurogang Manual (Weerman, et al., 2009: 20) and associated data collection instruments (The Eurogang Project, n.d.). At the 2018 workshop in Almen, the Netherlands, working groups were convened to explore these issues and consider any necessary changes needed to these guiding documents. This process is ongoing after renewed discussions at the 19th Eurogang workshop held in the summer of 2019 at the University of Kent, in Canterbury, England. Chapters in this volume will describe some of the inherent controversies in using the Internet and social media to study gangs and some of the social processes that make this source of information intriguing from a social scientific standpoint. They will also offer some new approaches to gang definitions and classifications that may be useful to study new appearances of gangs and troublesome youth groups in the modern era.

## **Contents of this Volume**

The current volume is comprised of two parts. The first part focuses specifically on gangs and the internet, and is comprised of both methodologically oriented chapters on the merits, controversies, and ethical considerations associated with Internet-based research, as well as empirical analyses examining the association between gangs, social media, and the internet. The second part is a collection of chapters on other important areas of modern gang research and intervention, especially as it relates to factors associated with disengagement from gangs and official responses to these groups.

The book opens with a chapter by one of the leading criminologists in the area of cybercrime, Dr. Thomas Holt, who provides an overview of the considerations researchers need to keep in mind when using online communications as a source of scientific study. Importantly, this chapter helps to situate those interested in using

online platforms for gang research into the standards of practice for online data collection methodologies more broadly, in what is a quickly developing and changing area of research. The second chapter, by Urbanik and colleagues, goes into detail on the practical and ethical dilemmas faced by gang researchers in this area. Through retrospective accounts of their own use of the Internet and social media in their research with gangs across multiple contexts, these researchers frankly describe in vivid detail how online platforms shaped their research and the problems and prospects they encountered while doing this sort of research. In particular, this chapter focuses on the meanings associated with “gang artefacts” found online and the problems inherent in interpretations made from online postings.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the volume provide a mix of theoretical and empirical examinations of gangs in the era of the Internet and social media, focusing on how information and communications technologies have altered the interpersonal dynamics of streets gangs. Fernandez-Planells and colleagues describe how globalization and social media have changed the gang landscape, and provide a detailed description of how these processes have led to the emergence of transnational gangs and new roles for gang members as agents of mediation in local contexts around the globe. They call for a renewed understanding of the role of gangs in the modern era, where crime and violence are but a part of the complex roles these groups can play in society. Carballo and Van Damme explore how representations of gangs in digital media is shaped by the local context, especially as it relates to the roles of men and women in gangs. Through systematic comparative coding of online news media posts on females in gangs across two Central American countries, Honduras and El Salvador, the authors demonstrate unique ways in which women are portrayed across these contexts. What the chapter makes clear, however, is that gender roles, with males viewed as gang leaders and females as their subordinates, remain a powerful influence on how gang activities are described in popular press coverage of gang violence.

McCuddy and Esbensen provide a quantitative comparative assessment of the similarities and differences in the online and offline communication patterns of gang and non-gang youth. Interestingly, they find gang youth report greater use of online communication technologies than non-gang respondents in their multi-site sample. However, the effects of exclusively online peers do not appear to produce unique effects on delinquent outcomes once controlling for offline peer delinquency, which suggests online activities may best be conceived as an extension of peer processes that take place on the street.

Reid and Valasik tackle the issue of far right, alt-right, groups that have been a focus of attention in much of the USA and European countries in the past 5 years. Largely based upon the demographic make-up of these groups and the political nature of their activities, white supremacist and other hate groups have largely been studied outside the context of street gangs. In this chapter, however, the authors make the case that the current manifestation of alt-right groups should be considered street gangs. Through analysis of content posted on a popular social media platform for these types of groups, the authors explore the possible connections

between online activities and real world behaviors, especially after notable violent events.

Lastly, Galasso and colleagues take a different approach to understanding the role of social media in producing real world violence, and the impact street gangs have on this dynamic, by examining these topics in a general sample of youth in a high crime city. Importantly, this work adds to the growing body of literature on the role of gangs and social media in the etiology of violence because it did not purposively sample on these factors. That is, those involved in the study were not recruited through social media platforms, nor did they have to be a gang member to participate. Rather, this general sample of school-aged youth were asked to describe the etiology of violence in their local schools and neighborhoods, and how social media and gangs influenced these incidents. This study suggests that social media exacerbates interpersonal disputes among youth, both serving as an instigator in physical fights and as a venue for post conflict communications between the subjects and their peers. That said, in their local context, it did not appear that gangs and their members were unique in their use of social media for such purposes, or a particularly salient part of the interpersonal disputes emanating from this local school context.

The second part of the book provides empirical and theoretical insights into a number of persistent gang issues, including gang disengagement and effective responses to gangs. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 focus on the factors associated with leaving gangs and the multitude of physical, emotional, and social consequences of the disengagement process. Both Forkby and colleagues as well as Morck and associates examine gang disengagement through qualitative examination of the lives of former gang members, many of whom were active in biker gangs. These authors describe the trials and tribulations of ex-gang members with respect to their development of new identities, and how past associations with gangs continued to influence their lives well after they first walked away from the gang lifestyle. Decker and Pyrooz examine the role of spirituality and religion in the disengagement process, owing to the commonly held belief that prisoners are inspired by religious and spiritual factors to change their deviant ways. Interestingly, they find the relationship between religion, spirituality, and disengagement to be complex, suggesting religion may not inspire disengagement, but rather those who are more removed from the gang lifestyle report growing more spiritual.

The remaining four chapters provide further insights into modern responses to gangs and gang members, from official sanctions to community and programmatic interventions. Scott explores the influence of formal and informal activities on the likelihood of involvement in violent incidents among youth housed in a juvenile justice facility. In particular, he examines whether the common finding of a positive association between time spent in unstructured activities and involvement in violent crime holds true in a confined facility. Results suggest that while gang members are involved in a higher number of violent incidents in juvenile justice facilities, the role of structured and unstructured activities is not as straight forward as is the case on the street. De Jong and Denkers explore the all-important question of how interventionists can best connect with high-risk adolescent gang members and work to

reduce their often violent misbehavior. They draw upon two sources of data to examine whether “tough love” strategies may well help to improve interpersonal relationships between street workers and troubled youth. Rubenson and Huey provide an overview of the disconcerting reality that interventions that aim to help gangs and gang members reduce their involvement in crime and violence may do more harm than good. They review the literature on iatrogenic effects before critically examining what these unintended consequences mean in practice, and how we might better examine the efficacy of gang interventions and monitor both their potential successes and failures. Lastly, Dyberg and Egan provide an in-depth overview and push for further development of programs and practices in the area of moral psychology in gang focused prevention and intervention strategies. In particular, these authors make a case for why moral disengagement is a useful theoretical model associated with gang member offending, and how “discriminant moral disengagement” might be conceptualized in gang prevention and intervention.

In conclusion, the Eurogang Program of Research has contributed greatly to the advancement of gang research across the globe. Hundreds of researchers have attended the 19 workshops hosted across numerous countries in Europe and North America. What started off as a small group of researchers interested in the comparative study of gangs and troublesome youth groups has evolved into a lasting program that has attracted the attention of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners dealing with youth crime and violence. That said, the original goals of this collective have yet to be achieved. We have yet to sustain prospective, multi-method, comparative gang research on a global scale. This volume, however, takes us a step in the right direction by focusing on the role of the Internet and social media as a medium of study for gang research. The Internet opens new channels for comparative research that can help break down many of the barriers international scholars have faced in collecting comparative data. Modern technology will continue to evolve to create better opportunities for collecting valid and reliable data on gangs and the local context, and to the extent that we make use of these advancements will have the direct benefit of pushing the Eurogang research agenda forward, in hopes of achieving our ultimate goals of prospective, multi-method, comparative gang research.

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**Scott H. Decker** is Foundation Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. In 2009, he received the University Award for Cutting Edge Research in 2009, and was named a Foundation Professor in 2010. Prior to working at ASU, he was Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at UM-St. Louis where he received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research in 1989 and was named Curators' Professor in 2001. Professor Decker was named a fellow of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in 2007, was named a fellow of the

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**Carles Feixa** is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona. He has investigated youth gangs in Spain and Latin America. He is the author of several books, like *Global Youth?* (2006) and *Youth, Space and Time* (2006). Principal Investigator of the ERC AdG TRANSGANG and ICREA Academia.

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**Justin Heinze** is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Behavior and Health Education in the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan. He also serves as the Evaluation Lead of the U-M Injury Prevention Center's Outreach and Translation Core. Dr. Heinze is an educational psychologist with a concentration in measurement, evaluation, and statistics. He has evaluated the effectiveness of many core projects, including SAMHSA's Drug-free Communities program and Michigan's Core State Violence and Injury Prevention Program (CDC), and has taught graduate-level courses on health program evaluation. Dr. Heinze is currently the lead evaluator for two National Institute of Justice-funded interventions focused on school safety and violence prevention, the lead investigator of an NIJ-funded study of an anonymous reporting system designed for the early identification of threats in a school community, and leads the U-M Injury Prevention Center in supporting program evaluation of our partner agencies.

**Thomas J. Holt** is a professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University (USA) whose research focuses on computer hacking, malware, and the role of the Internet in facilitating all manners of crime and deviance. His work has been published in various journals including *Crime and Delinquency*, *Deviant Behavior*, *the Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Youth and Society*.

**Stanley Huey Jr.** is Associate Professor of Psychology and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. His research focuses on (1) psy-

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**Timothy McCuddy** is an assistant research professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (USA). He received his PhD in Criminology and Criminal Justice from the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 2018. His research focuses on how technology affects social processes related to crime, such as online peer influence and cyberbullying. He is also interested in how broader social contexts (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, and the Internet) affect involvement in delinquency. He is currently the Project Director of the UMSL Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, a longitudinal study on school safety funded by the National Institute of Justice.

**Chris Melde** is Associate Director, Director of Graduate Studies, and an Associate Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. He is an affiliated faculty member in Global Urban Studies and the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University, and a research associate at the Michigan Justice Statistics Center. His primary research interests include street gangs, youth violence, adolescent development, individual and community reactions to crime and victimization risk, and program evaluation. He is currently the principal investigator or co-principal investigator on several funded projects, including two National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded projects on school safety in the Flint, MI, area. These projects focus on the role of school safety in the successful transition to high school, the identification of mental health issues among students in elementary schools, and best practices for developing a positive and safe school climate. Dr. Melde was awarded the 2015 Tory J. Caeti Memorial Award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Juvenile Justice section, given in recognition of the contribution of emerging scholars to the field of juvenile justice, for his work on gangs and youth violence prevention.

**María Oliver** is predoctoral researcher at the University Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona), who collaborates in TRANSGANG project as Fieldwork Support Researcher in Madrid (Spain). A former member of the ALKQN, she combines her personal experience with her academic studies both in education and gender fields. Among her fields of study are intercultural education; gender violence in youth street groups and memory in youth street groups.

**David Pyrooz** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder. He is also a faculty associate in the Problem Behavior and Positive Youth Development Program in the Institute of Behavioral Science. He received BS and MS in Criminology from California State University, Fresno, and PhD in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Arizona State University in 2012. Prior to joining the Department of Sociology in 2015, he was a faculty member in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. He was the 2015 recipient of the inaugural New Scholar Award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and the 2016 recipient of the Ruth Shonle Cavan Young Scholar award from the American Society of Criminology. He is the co-author of *Confronting Gangs: Crime and Community* (Oxford), the co-editor of *The Wiley Handbook of Gangs* (Wiley-Blackwell), and the author of a National Institute of Justice white paper on the relationship between gang affiliation and restrictive housing in US prisons.

**Shannon Reid** is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (USA).

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