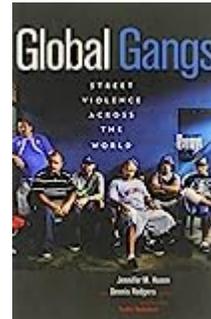




Jennifer M. Hazen, Dennis Rodgers, eds. *Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-9147-0; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-9149-4.



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Gangs Across the Globe

Global Gangs is a good volume to consult if one is looking for brief analytic descriptions of the origins, evolution, and nature of “youth gangs” in disparate countries. Twelve chapters organized under two headings—“Gang Formation and Transformation” and “Problematizing Gangs”—offer concise descriptions of gangs or “ganglike” entities. The first grouping “addresses questions about the emergence and evolution of gangs” and the second, “definitional and relational questions as these challenge common wisdoms about gangs” (p. 13). The countries discussed in the first grouping include South Africa, the United States, Russia, China, France, and El Salvador while those in section 2 concern Indonesia, Sierra Leone, India, Kenya, Brazil, and Mexico. An introductory chapter laying out the rationale for this volume is provided by the editors Jennifer Hazen and Dennis Rodgers, and an afterword by Sudhir Venkatesh highlights the contributions made by the substantive chapters along with the overall significance of these contributions to our understanding (or lack thereof) of gangs. Each chapter is authored by scholars who are recognized

authorities on gangs or ganglike entities generally or in their respective countries. This anthology thus provides an excellent reference volume for anyone interested in understanding youth gangs from a global perspective or has a particular interest in some country or region.

The chapters included in the section on gang formation and transformation clearly concern entities normally recognized as youth gangs in common parlance and scholarly research. Those in the section entitled “Problematizing Gangs” concern violent organizations that many people may not include in the category “youth gang.” But that, in part, is the point of this entire volume—to challenge contemporary images of youth gangs and the culturally biased body of knowledge accumulated over the decades in scholarly attempts to understand gangs and the behavior of their members.

Perhaps the single most important point articulated throughout this volume, either directly or by implication, is that both scholars and policymakers should not treat gangs as a social problem (deviant forms of violent

youth organizations) to be understood as some kind of social pathology and/or eradicated from society. Rather, the ubiquity of gangs or ganglike entities across the globe should lead us to understand gangs as specific forms of social arrangements that are probably universally formed from the same conditions, but variable across societies and changing as the social/economic/political conditions that impact them vary and change from society to society and over time. And it is this variability and changing (evolving) nature of youth gangs that makes both understanding and dealing with them so difficult. As provided by this volume, a more global perspective on youth gangs helps us better comprehend the eclectic nature of the youth gang phenomena. As indicated throughout the discussions of specific countries, with this increased understanding more rational policies (as opposed to “better” police “crack downs”) might be formulated to deal with gangs and their members.

But, if one is looking for an unambiguous answer to questions such as why gangs form, seemingly universally; or why their members engage in the behaviors many people find objectionable; or why individual youths choose to join some gang, it will not be found in this volume. Nor would such an answer likely be possible in any case, for, as made clear by the country-specific descriptions offered in this volume, no single entity one might refer to as a “youth gang” is to be found universally. Instead, as noted by Hazen and Rodgers, what this volume does is “highlight ... the socially embedded nature of all gangs, regardless of their location, and how different environments can affect their origins and their transformation in different ways” (p. 17). As the main aim of the editors, the individual discussions of gangs in highly diverse nations across the globe offered in this volume make a valuable contribution to our understanding of youth gang origins and transformations regardless of their specific form and behavior at any given moment in time or place.

Hazen and Rodgers are quite correct in discussing both the lack of and need for a less country-specific (largely American) focus in research and theory about

youth gangs (as well, we might add, as a host of other social phenomena, such as youth crime and delinquency). And I take no issue with their critique of past research on “gangs” and the limited perspective of them this research has generated since the original studies in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States from the early decades of the twentieth century. However, I think the editors’ time could have been better spent highlighting the very thing the volume actually provides—a broader understanding of the differences and similarities of “youth gangs” as such. Indeed, Venkatesh’s afterword would have been an excellent place to begin. He notes that “Rather than focusing on the gang as an exception, perhaps we should be accounting for the diversity of factors that bring them about” (p. 281). Sadly, it is left to the reader to try to ferret out what these factors might be. Instead of a laudatory review of the proceeding chapters, it would have been far more useful for the editors to include a concluding chapter highlighting the common themes that run through almost all of the substantive chapters (e.g., marginalization, urbanization, poverty, political repression, ethnic identity, and the like).

Perhaps it is far too early to attempt to build any grand, universally valid, theory about gangs. And perhaps this and more volumes like it will be necessary before such theory building would even be feasible. But, if this volume, is a “beginning” for such understanding, hopefully as a global understanding of gangs (and other social phenomena) accumulates, future books on such matters will depart from the standard County A, County B, County C format that has become characteristic of global/international/cross-cultural, etc., volumes. Instead, the country-specific information normally provided in analyses of individual case studies will come to serve as data from which we might draw a comprehensive picture of the “gang” which, in turn, can be used as a starting point (or “beginning”) to understanding “the gang” rather than simply gangs in Country A, B, C or whatever. In the context of “youth gangs,” only then will we be able to answer the question posed by Venkatesh: “Why shouldn’t gangs exist” (p. 281)?

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