

Personally, I have never been part of a gang. In fact, where I'm from, Seattle, gangs are neither that popular nor ruthless. There is nothing more than a couple neighborhood gangs that collectively sell weed or gang bang their block. I'm very curious about gangs because it's not something that I get to see everyday, yet I hear about it constantly through the glorification of gang culture in films, television, and by the music industry. I'm vastly drawn to the pre-gang tell tails/gang initiation aspects of new gang recruits. I've always wanted to understand the different reasons these young kids join gangs, and what their motivation is to do so. I have sympathy for a lot of the youth that join these gangs because often it's not out of choice. Overall, I want to understand what causes them to join gangs and what their motives for joining the gang are.

In March of 2007, an innocent seventeen year old, Ross Capicchioni, was shot and beat to near death in East Detroit. He was doing his friend a favor and dropping him off at his cousin's home. When Ross got out of the car with his so called friend, he was shot from point blank in the chest, arm, and head. That's correct, his friends of ten years reeled him into driving him deep into east Detroit, got out of the car with him, and boom (Most). Why would this ruthless kid shoot and beat an innocent person? It was his initiation to become a part of a Detroit gang. He had to kill an innocent person to join this ruthless gang in Detroit. It's sickening, but a harsh reality in the national and international gang worlds. There are over 1.4 million prison and street gangs criminally active today, and the amount of youth being pulled into these criminal families is only shooting up (FBI). Gangs are responsible for over 48% of violent crimes in the U.S. on average (FBI). Why do so many youth devote themselves to a life of criminal activity through gangs? What do gang initiations really look like? Many young people join gangs because of the economics involved, the sense of family, and the media's vast and powerful face.

To understand gangs in US neighborhoods and cities, it's essential to understand what a gang is. A gang is at its basics is an association of three or more individuals, in the act and purpose to cause violent crimes as one (What Is a Gang?). Generally, there are two kinds of gangs; 'youth gangs' and 'street gangs'. These terms are often used interchangeably (What Is a Gang?). The members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity, which they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation. Gang identity is a leading factor of youth joining gangs. Gangs manipulate young people into joining. Gang bangers wear the latest fashion trends, throw massive parties, and drive flashy vehicles. To a kid who is looking to fit in, they appear as having the perfect lifestyle. Gangs offer such a glorified image of what they consume, which is supported fully by media and the music industry. Often, gangs identify themselves by employing things like a common name, slogan, symbol, tattoo, or other physical marking, style or color of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign, or graffiti (Walker). These pieces of identity are key to the establishment of the gangs, especially to the youth. Teens are figuring out who they are, and these physical identities are very intriguing and exciting. Gang operations main purpose is to be powerful through money, and to do that; it's through engaging in criminal activity, which uses violence or intimidation to further its criminal objectives. The members, who engage in criminal and violent activity, have the intent to enhance or reserve the association's power, reputation or economic resources. Members may employ rules for joining and operating within the association, may meet on a recurring basis, have the association give physical protection of and for its members from others, seek to exercise control over a particular geographic location or region, or it may simply defend its perceived interests against rivals (Why Do Youth Join Gangs?). Defining types or gangs, or types of gang activity, into a general concept, would be invalid. Each gang merits its characteristics that differ at national, regional, and local levels, which is "gang identity."

There are other factors of a gang identity that stands out to youth. They influence them to want to join and become an active member. Colors are a major identity of gangs. Members are not afraid to show their colors, they take pride, which is what is truly intriguing to young people. It comes across as showing power and being a part of a 'game' (Walker). To the people around them, these colors represent whom they stand for. It's a physical way of showing who and what they are. For example, Crips and Bloods have very distinguished colors. Crips are blue, and the rival gang, Bloods, is red. These gang colors represent the majority of the identity that go into gang communities (Walker). It's a mark of pride for gang members, and they will kill for their colors. Lately, in the gang world, the use of colors in someone's everyday life has been toned down immensely due to federal government and investigation purposes on groups and individual gang members (Walker).

Stepping away from colors and lifestyle, the last identification part of gangs that youth take a huge part of is words. By words, I mean tattoos, graffiti, tagging, verbal, and hand gang banging. Nothing symbolizes gang membership to the youth more so than gang tattoos (GANG INK). Every gang has its own set of tattoos and markings that are spread across the body and face. They represent the beliefs of the gang member in a permanent way. These symbols and words put on the individual's body proclaim the youth's individual pledge to the group and loyalty (GANG INK). It brings a sense of belonging to the youth, and a relation to someone else even if they are not close physically or mentally. Being an outlaw can be such a source of pride for rebellious young youth who don't know where to fit in; it becomes an outlook, or an alternative, branding them to become outside of the boundaries of conventional society.

50 to 85 percent of gang members come either from a single parent home or one, which no parent resides (Carlie). The reason lots of youth join gangs is to get that sense of family. Speaking along the lines of identity, or identity as a community of people, it brings aspects of family. Youth join gangs to get away from the negative lives they have to live at home. Youth often feel that gangs can protect them and keep them safe within the neighborhood. As much as social class does not determine the presence of parents for their kids, it's known in lower class areas and communities, parents are not always fully supportive, and kids don't have two figures of parenting, due to economic stances and other financial issues (Carlie). Gangs promise to the youth that they will give unconditional support, and to become the family they never had. Gangs are proven to give a lot of unconditional love and be the positive discipline that they do not get at home (Carlie). Youths who join gangs hope to find an alternative family is understandable. The part of this that is scary and blinding to youth, who are brainwashed into a gang cycle, is the consequences of joining the gangs that might follow. A lot of the time youth are too innocent to realize what they are getting themselves into, and before they know it, it's too late to back out.

The structure of the American family has undergone significant change over the past several decades, especially in the lower class areas. It was once that most children were raised in a family with a mother and father who maintained their marriage throughout the child's life until at least their young adulthood. It's been proven countless times that children, in their earlier years as a kid and young teen, that are raised in a family with a mother and father, are raised with higher morals and are given the attention needed to stay away from gangs (Carlie). If devotion to society's laws is valued, the child will probably end up valuing these and abiding by these laws later on in life because of the positive influence drawn onto them. "The family is the most important agent of socialization in the United States, especially for Children." (Schaefer 101). If

families are broken apart, like so many are, its detrimental to the social aspects of kids. It corrupts kids and cause stir incredible emotion that can lead to bad things.

“The National Science Foundation recently summarized the current state of affairs regarding families in the United States. Their report portrays the family as being in the midst of a struggle to survive the impact of social and economic changes.”(Carlie). Its also fair to say, that based on modern day reports, and media, its shown that the economic stance and struggle for so many Americans, has made it so difficult to create a successful and moral new generation. Divorce rates, and single motherhood rates have increased dramatically in the last 40 years, which means that good shares of American kids are being raised and exposed to single parenthood. These changes have shown to be a lot more common for poor families, and a lot of the time for racial and ethnic minorities (Carlie). These results are major, if not all the contributions to a lot of formations and joining of youth to gangs. Families that have poor discipline, poor relationships with children, abuse, spouse abuse, and alcohol/drug abuse, give an increasing risk for involvement in delinquency (Carlie). When discipline is used correctly, it reinforces compliance with family expectations that lead to good morals. When it’s used inappropriately, like it is here for so many youth, it motions into a cycle of abuse that drive youth from their families and turns into gang involvement. Many gang members come from dysfunctional families that share these abusive traits. It truly damages youth’s brain, and leave them lonely and desperate, which leads to gang members manipulating them into unconditional love and support. It’s a brainwashed system that is almost barbaric in our time.

Unconditional love is of a love that goes about without any limitations. A lot of the time unconditional love is expressed through parental figures such as fathers. Those who experience it are very fortunate and have a sense of companionship, which a lot of the time is what a father gives to their son. An unnamed west coast gang member was asked why he thinks youth are drawn to gangs, he replied, “Effectively none of them have father ship, and if they do, he has poor parenting skills. Their kids don’t take responsibility for their actions, and there is no one there to hold them responsible. “(Strachan). Kids join gangs because they do not have that sense of fathership and support of the same gender in their family. Fathers bring the biggest sense of comfort and protection for kids who have them. They teach them right from wrong, or at least they are the figure for sons that get the message across in a perfect reality, “Fatherlessness in America is at historically high levels. Four out of 10 children – an estimated 24 million – do not have their fathers present in their homes.”(Carlie). Not having a father can be one of the most difficult things, especially when surrounded by people who might have one, and seeing the way they interact, and wanting that feeling. Children and youth from fatherless homes are more likely to do poor in most criteria’s, and join gangs, to find that relationship and sense of father ship. In essence, and in brief remarks, is that the absence of a consistent male role model in majority of low-income households created identity problems for males. This is where gangs come in, and emphasize on tough masculinity, male bonding, and tougher values, and essentially have taken the place of fathers in providing an idolizing identity for boys that have been primarily raised in a single mom household (Carlie). Gang membership, to these ignorant influenced kids, plays a vital role in learning and practicing the characteristics and outlooks of male adulthood that they never had.

The media has the most influenced and vast wide spread of information known to date. A lot of the media influences are detrimental to the last couple decades of society across the globe. One of the biggest influences towards youth and young people in general, is the music industry. Music plays with the mind, and it causes incredible emotion. Some songs can make one want to

cry and save the world, and others, literally have caused shootouts at schools. Artists, as famous idolized and worshipped musicians, are of the most influence to young people. Rap and hip-hop music can tremendously influence American youth in positive and negative ways. Sadly, the negative effects outweigh the positive by a heavy load, from the way the youth are influenced to act, behave towards themselves and others, dress, and live (Thoj). Some, rather a lot of the youth, have no male role models to look up to, so they look up to rap and hip hop artists that influence them. When someone idolized or looks up to another person, they tend to try to act and follow in the footsteps of them, to be like them. This includes their actions, ideas, the way they live, dress and act towards others (Thoj). Rappers use lyrics that affect the mind of brainwashed teens, saying that they must use violence in order to win or survive. In late 1970's when hip-hop took off, it started influencing young teens in a lot of negative ways, such as violence. In a wall street journal, it describes the last couple decades of rap and hip hop as 'a religion for troubled youth' (Thoj). It gives them something to believe in, and act upon, whether it's to help or destroy others. The violent lyrics in hip-hop are a major cause of teenagers starting fights, killing others, and joining gangs. Hip-hop's culture is associated with different gangs for the majority. Big artists are open with what gang they affiliate with. Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur, that over gang rivalry and blown up media, were both killed and left as legends that died.

The marketers that work for these big stars plaster an un-obtainable but believable identity upon teenagers as they go through the maze. Once they have reached the end of the maze, they are brainwashed into what the artists believe in, and what the artist talks about. For example, a contemporary rap artist, Chief Keef. He is a hood Chicago rapper who has made it big, and surely influenced tons of people. The mix tape that set off Chief Keef's career is called 'Bang pt.1'. The lyrics are heavily influenced and glorified by his ways of violence, and his gang, '3 HUNNA'. His hit song on the album, named 'bang' has lyrics such as, " But I'm a let that hamma blow like bang...bang...bang...bang...bang..." he goes on saying that for a while. Later that year, in 2012, a Chicago gang affiliated rival rapper Lil jojo, stirred back at Chief Keef for a couple songs, claiming his gang '3 HUNNA K' standing for 3 HUNNA Killers. Days after the song was released on YouTube, titled '300K', Lil jojo was pronounced dead, in the Chicago area. This powerful hip-hop incident alone has caused a lot of tension between gangs in Chicago, and it has dragged youth alone into gangs to help the cause. If rappers talk about gang life, and what they have earned from it, it's obvious that kids will follow in the footsteps of them to be like them.

In today's society, our lives revolve around economics. Money rules the world. Our culture and environment has dug itself deep into an economic debt of slavery. It is very hard to provide in today's society and even harder to get legal employment. Urban youth's involvement in drugs and crime come from the basics of hustling money. In gangs, the main objective is money; violent crimes are just in the process of hustling. Very few gang members make a lot, and the majority of gang members could not make a living off their profits (Gang Economics). Youth are intrigued to join gangs because of the ambition it takes to earn money in gangs. You have to be a warrior and fight and commit crimes to earn a place in gangs. They have social hierarchy in an economical sense. In some gangs, leaders pocket an average of 100,000 a year, and lower employed gang members, who manage gang funds and drug operations received an average of 1,000 dollars a month (Gang Economics). An economic theory that fits a gang system through hierarchy is called compensating differentials. According to this theory, when a worker exercises more effort, or has to work with higher risk tasks, he will receive more financially. Tournament economics is another major theory. Reasons that kids and members stay in the

group is that small chance of becoming the gang leader, which is the person who takes the lion share. It's like a tournament because you have to work up to it, with ambition and no fear (Gang Economics). The more violence, the more money.

To sum up the reasons that kids join gangs, it would be fair to say that there is no universal reason that causes kids to join gangs. The media influences some, some want a father figure, and others want money. Gangs are a major issue in the United States, and across the globe. Youth are joining by the minute through these different influences. The cycle of how they work are too powerful to stop, the least that can be done is provide proper education to kids in our generation about how manipulating they can be, and will be.

Bibliography

- Carlie, Mike. "Into the Abyss: The Absence of a Family and Its Unconditional Love." *Into the Abyss: The Absence of a Family and Its Unconditional Love*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.
- Carlie, Mike. "Into the Abyss: The Mass Media." *Into the Abyss: The Mass Media*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.
- "Gang Economics." *University of Chicago Magazine Online*. Uchicago, n.d. Web. 11 Nov. 2013. <<http://magazine.uchicago.edu/9810/html/invest5.htm>>.
- "Gangs." *FBI*. FBI, 19 Mar. 2010. Web. 30 Nov. 2013. <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/gangs>.
- "[GANGINK.COM] GANG TATTOO DATABASE." [*GANGINK.COM*] *GANG TATTOO DATABASE*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.
- "Gangs: Why Do People Join Gangs?" *Gangs: Why Do People Join Gangs?* N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013. <http://www.ablongman.com/html/psychplace_acts/gangs/whyjoin.html>.
- "Harper High School; Part One." Audio blog post. *This American Life*. Chicago Public Media, 15 Feb. 2013. Web. 2 Dec. 2013.
- "MOST INSPIRATIONAL STORY EVER!" *YouTube*. YouTube, 08 May 2012. Web. 03 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6klClwZVHfE>>.
- Semark, Douglas. "Gang Alternatives Program (GAP)." *Gang Alternatives Program (GAP)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.
- Semark, Douglas. "Why People Join Gangs." *Gang Alternatives Program (GAP)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <http://www.gangfree.org/gangs_why.html>.
- Strachan, Owen. "What a Dad Means to a Son: The Strong One." *Thought Life*. N.p., 16 Nov. 2005. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.
- Thoj, Abkoob. "The Impact of Rap and Hip-Hop Music On American Youth." *Teen Ink*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/all/article/303133/The-Impact-of-Rap-and-Hip-Hop-Music-On-American-Youth/>>.
- Walker, Robert. "Clothes Worn by Street Gangs." *Street Gang Clothes*. N.p., 13 Mar. 2013. Web. 03 Dec. 2013. <http://gangsorus.com/gang_clothing.html>.
- "Why Do Youth Join Gangs?" *Why Do Youth Join Gangs?* N.p., 18 Aug. 1998. Web. 02 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.ojjdp.gov/jjbulletin/9808/why.html>>.

"What Is a Gang? Definitions." *National Institute of Justice*. The Research, Development, and Evaluation Agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, 28 Oct. 2011. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

"Why Young People Join Gangs - Official Website of THE LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT." *Why Young People Join Gangs - Official Website of THE LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT*. Radar Blue, n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2013.
<http://www.lapdonline.org/get_informed/content_basic_view/23473>.