

Chapter I

The Emergence of Gangs in the United States—Then and Now



CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Examine the emergence of gangs in the United States.
- Explore where gangs from New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles first emerged.
- Identify the differences and similarities between each regions growth of gangs.
- Examine the emergence of Black and Hispanic/Latino gangs.
- Describe the newest gang trends throughout the United States.

“The Cat’s Alleys,” the Degraw Street Gang, the Sackett Street gang, “The Harrisons,” the Bush Street Gang, and 21 other boys’ gangs were the subjects of a report of the New York State Crime Commission which told, last week, of its findings in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn.

The boys who comprise the gangs have to undergo rigorous initiations before being qualified for membership. In one of the more exclusive gangs initiates, usually aged about nine, have to drink twelve glasses of dago-red wine and have a revolver pressed into their temples while they take the pledge.

Source: *Gangs* (1927). *Time*, 9(13), 11.

Introduction

The above excerpt comes from a 1927 article in *Time Magazine* that identifies local gangs in New York City and their activities. However, gangs existed long before any established city in the United States. British crime chronicler, Luke Pike (1873), reported that the first

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set of active gangs were in Europe. During those times, they were better known as highway robbers. According to Pike, these robbers may have existed as early as the 12th century in Europe, but these types of gangs have very little in common with today’s modern-day (street) gangs.

In the United States, it is believed that gangs emerged on the East Coast around 1783 (Sante, 1991). But, it is unlikely that the “street gangs” of the late 1700s are any resemblance of how the gangs of today are defined. Sante notes that the best available evidence suggests that the more serious gangs of the early 19th century are more comparable to the gangs of today. The growth of these gangs, for the most part, was the result of immigration.

Gangs in the 1800s were largely composed of Irish, Jewish, Polish, and other ethnic populations that immigrated to the United States. There were more than three million immigrants that entered the United States from Ireland between 1840 and 1890, and by the turn of the century, an estimated five million Irish settled in the United States. Additionally, 18 million new immigrants arrived between 1890 and 1920 (primarily from Eastern and Southeastern Europe) (Barrett & Roediger, 2005).

However, Europeans were not the only ones making their way to the United States, specifically New York City. The African-American population from the South migrated to the North and West, and the Hispanic/Latino population migrated their way to New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Table 1.1 shows a brief historical timeline on the emergence of street gangs in the United States

Table 1.1: Timeline of the U.S. Street Gang History

EARLY STREET GANGS IN THE NORTHEAST
1780s to 1870s: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Immigrants from England and Ireland began the formation of gangs in the northeastern part of the United States. Most notable were the Forty Thieves, Dead Rabbits, Plug Uglies, and Whyos. By the mid-1800s, gangs began to get involved in violent crimes.
GANG RE-EMERGENCE AND GROWTH
1880s to 1940s: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Gang continued to grow in the Northeast and Midwest. Gangs were primarily established based on ethnicity. Irish gangs such as the Dukies and the Shielders and the arrival of German, Jewish and Polish immigrants battled for turf. Blacks migrated from the south to Chicago and Italian immigrants established the American Mafia. Gangs were popular in New York City and Chicago.

(Continued)

GANG GROWTH AND CHANGE

1950s to 1990s:

- Major Black street gangs formed in the late 1950s. By the end of the 1960s, the majority of gangs were black or Hispanic. Migration and immigration contributed to gang membership. Large gang groups were formed, such as the Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings. In the 1960s and early 1970s, African-American “supergangs” emerged in Chicago such as the Gangster Disciples and the Vice Lords.

GANGS TODAY

2000s to Present:

- During the 2000s, the most active gangs were the Crips, the Latin Kings, MS-13, and the Bloods and gang membership exceed over 500,000. Gangs are known for marking their territory (graffiti) and commit a variety of property and violent crimes such as murder, drug, weapon, sex trafficking, prostitution, and thefts. Gangs have also established the presence on the Internet and on social media.

The Northeast

Early New York City Street Gangs

Understanding the development of the street gang phenomenon on the East Coast is best explained in three distinct phases: (1) post-American Revolution, where unorganized youth were fighting over local turf; (2) the explosion of immigration from the early to late 1800s; and (3) when minority populations, primarily Latino and Black, began to arrive in large numbers in the 1930s and 1940s (Howell, 2012; Pincus & Ehrlich, 1999). As numerous groups of people from different countries crammed into New York City, conflict was imminent. As a result, street gangs grew rapidly.

Initially, early street gangs were viewed as troubled or wayward youth engaging in minor delinquent acts. While these early street gangs were not well organized and lacked sophisticated leadership, the desire to exercise power and control became evident among the gangs. As Howell and Moore (2010) pointed out, these gangs were nothing more than youth fighting over local turf and protecting their neighborhoods.

New York City was the most prominent location in the Northeast for the growth of street gangs. Immigration, poverty, racial/ethnic tensions, and lack of employment opportunities contributed to this growth and significantly impacted the crime rates in New York City (Howell, 2012; Howell & Moore, 2010; Pizarroa & McGloin, 2006). In addition, green-grocery speakeasies and politics also played a significant part in the development of gangs in New York City.

Green-grocery speakeasies established the first defined *turfs* in the streets of New York City. These speakeasies were an Irish invention that used the pub culture, and the men that frequented them, to assist the Irish in becoming politically dominant. The first speakeasy was a grungy bar located on Centre Street in Five Points run by Rosanna Peers. This Five Points store was actually a “fence” where Ms. Peters would buy and resell goods stolen by gangs (Edwards, 2013). Although these stores primarily sold vegetables, it was nothing more than a facade for the true purpose behind these establishments—the sale of liquor.

In the 1820s, the first documented street gang, with recognized leadership, was the Forty Thieves (Allender, 2001). The Forty Thieves, comprised of Irish immigrants, formed in the Five Points District of New York City. The Five Points District was an area comprising of almost 90% foreign-born residents. The Forty Thieves operated along the waterfront and engaged in the acts of murder, robbery, and assault and in other violent acts (Allender, 2001; Anbinder, 2002). Other notable street gangs in New York City were the Dead Rabbits (allegedly named after someone threw a dead rabbit on the floor during a gang meeting), the Plug Uglies (named after the type of worn hat), the Kerryonians (named after an Irish county), and the Whyos (named after the sound made by a bird or owl calling, “Why-oh”) (Allender, 2001; Asbury, 1927; Howell, 2012; Sullivan & Silverstein, 1995). Ironically, the colors blue and red, also adopted by the Bloods and Crips from Los Angeles, was originally worn by Irish gangs in the 1920s. The Roach Guards wore blue, and the Dead Rabbits wore red (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

By 1910, roughly 13 million people of approximately 100 million living in the United States were foreign born and roughly three million of those were living in New York City (Gibson & Jung, 2006). New immigrants were faced with many challenges such as unsanitary living conditions and the lack of adequate housing. The various ethnic groups that resided within the city—the Jews, the Bohemians (Czechs and Slovaks), and the Chinese along with immigrants from Poland, Italy, and Austria—only contributed to the deteriorating conditions because of the economic conditions and quest for the “American Dream” of upward mobility (Sante, 1991). The fact was, New York City could not sustain this influx. Jakob Riis (1890) documented the horrific living conditions in New York City with photos in his classic work *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. Riis advocated for city reform and eventually New York City made improvements based on his work. However, within these poor living conditions, the shadowy world of street gangs flourished.

Other immigrants flooding New York City included African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. Torres (1995) pointed out that African-Americans were better positioned than Puerto Ricans to “withstand the ravages of economic and political changes that characterized New York” (p. 63). Essentially, as one family would better themselves and move out of the inner city for better living conditions, new immigrants would fill the void and occupy the residences. As a result, there were more gangs in New York City in the mid-1900s than in any other city in the United States (Asbury, 1927).

By 1916, the police commenced their first war on gangs and arrested, beat, and imprisoned more than 200 gang leaders (Haskins, 1974). The police actions, however, only pushed the gangs to move to outlying areas of New York City and migrate to cities such as Philadelphia and Boston (Chin, 1990).

Politics and Street Gangs

In addition to the flood of immigrants entering the United States, politics played a significant role in contributing to the growth of street gangs in New York City. At the center of most of the gang corruption during late 18th and early 19th century was New York City's Tammany Hall that later became known as the Democratic Party. A forerunner to modern street gangs were the "voting gangs" of the 1800s (Monkkonen, 2001). Shrewd wards and district leaders employed "voting gangs" to ensure victory at the polls in New York City (Haskins, 1974). Gangs were paid and encouraged by politicians to assist in elections. Rival political opponents were often assaulted and intimidated. These types of gangs would harass as new immigrants, primarily the Irish as they arrived to the United States, and get them to vote for the appropriate candidate in order to obtain the necessary votes for the preferred politician in order to win elections.

Tammany Hall controlled much of New York City and New York State politics. The organization helped immigrants, primarily the Irish, ascend in American politics from the 1790s up to the 1960s (see Haskins, 1974; Howell, 2012; *Sachems & Sinners: An Informal History of Tammany Hall*, 1955). It was estimated that 30,000 government and political figures owed allegiance to various gang leaders in New York City (Haskins, 1974). Unfortunately, law enforcement officials were powerless to arrest gang members and even when the local police attempted to guard polling stations against illegal voters, the "voting gangs" would beat them.

The Emergence of Black and Hispanic/Latino Street Gangs

The 1930s and 1940s brought about the most intense gang activity in New York City, partly because of the influence from organized crime groups such as the Five Mafia Families: the Bonanno, the Colombo, the Genovese, the Lucchese, and the Gambino Families. The 1930s and 1940s also witnessed the arrival of Hispanics/Latinos from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. These groups settled in East Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn (Howell, 2012). As the Hispanic/Latino youth made their presence known in Harlem and the Bronx, gang activity increased in these areas (Howell, 2012).

African-Americans also began to migrate from the rural South to the North in what historians and scholars call the "Great Migration of Blacks" (Tolnay, 2003). Between 1910 and 1930, 14% of New York's population was Black (Bourgois, 2003) and Harlem was one of the first Black Ghettos. According to Haskins (1974), "the area could not have been riper for sprouting of street gangs" (p. 80).

The 1940s also witnessed race riots among Italian Americans, Puerto Ricans, and African-Americans (Bourgois, 2003). Bourgois (2003) noted that Puerto Rican immigrants “generated the most antipathy by mainstream society because of their poorer economic status, malnutrition and disease” (p. 61). Meanwhile, East Harlem experienced juvenile gang fights between Italians and Puerto Ricans. One noticeable trend concerning gangs was gang members were getting younger, more ethnically diverse, more organized, dealing drugs, and armed with weapons (Haskins, 1974).

Today's New York City Street Gangs

While gangs are not as prevalent today in New York City as they once were, the FBI's 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment reports that since 2009, “gang membership increased most significantly in the Northeast” (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2009, p. 8). There are as many as 22,000 gang members in New York City, the majority coming from the Bronx and close to 50,000 gang members located throughout the state (NGIC, 2009).

Today, turf battles between immigrant populations based on urban renewal efforts and ethnic migrations are a thing of the past. Presently, officials point to anti-gang offensives such as “Operation Crew Cut” that has deterred street violence and other violent gang-related activities. According to Destefano (2013), “Operation Crew Cut is believed by police to have accounted for as much as a one-third drop in [New York City] homicides, as well as fewer shootings, which this year [2013] are down 26.4% compared to 2012” (para. 5).

The Midwest

Early Chicago Street Gangs

When people discuss gangs from the Midwest, an immediate connection is made to the city of Chicago. This is most likely for two reasons. First, Al Capone and the Chicago Mafia, the *Outfit*, was a dominant fixture in the City of Chicago. Second, Frederic Milton Thrasher (1927) conducted the gang research in which he studied.

Thrasher (1927) reported that street gangs from Chicago developed out of the White immigrant populations, primarily along ethnic lines. According to Thrasher's research, 37.37% of the gangs examined were Polish, 25% were Italian, 18.94% were Irish, and 5.05 were Jewish (p. 131).

By the mid- to late 1860s, ill-behaved groups, such as those breaking fences and stealing cabbages evolved into ominous gangs. These early Chicago-based youth gangs comprised mainly of German and Irish immigrants that would eventually succumb to the Polish gangs (Thrasher, 1927). By the late 1800s, the Irish gangs (the Dukies and the Shielders) exerted a powerful influence over other groups in the neighborhood (Howell, 2012). Initially, the Irish gangs fought among themselves but they eventually united as the “Mickies” to battle Black

gangs (who arrived in the 1920s) as well as German, Jewish, and Polish gangs (Barrett & Roediger, 2005; Howell & Moore, 2010; Perkins, 1987).

Politics and Street Gangs

Just like the gang–political connections that were historically present in New York City, Chicago gangs also became entrenched in the patronage networks of the political machines (Adamson, 2000; Lessoff & Connolly, 2013; Thrasher, 1927/2000). Similar to Tammany Hall, Chicago’s social athletic clubs (SACs) were crucial components of urban political life (Hagedorn, 2006). SACs were believed to be options for young, adolescents to get off the streets and find a better life. However, SACs were no different than “voting gangs.” Despite SACs providing a mean to obtain jobs as policemen, firemen, or other legitimate places of employment, the focus of the SACs was getting their Democratic Party officials elected. Thrasher (1927) noted that “the tendency of the gangs to become athletic clubs has been greatly stimulated by the politicians of the city” (p. 456). Even sociologist Edwin Sutherland (1924) commented on the political influence and need for young boys to feverishly support the political machine.

At the present time a good many gangs are flourishing under the leadership and protection of the politicians. These are frequently called athletic clubs and are fostered even among young boys, evidently with the expectation that political support will be gained in the future. In return for present support and expected future support the politicians extend protection to the boys in their depredation (p. 156).

Cooley (2011) also reported that gangs “often became acutely engaged with city politics” (p. 911). Just like that in New York City, Chicago gangs were hired to break picket lines, stuff ballot boxes, intimidate voters, and protect establishments from harassment by other gangs (Diamond, 2005; Moore & Williams, 2011; O’Kane, 1992).

The Emergence of Black and Hispanic/Latino Street Gangs

In the 1920s, there were only 63 reported Black gangs and no Mexican-American gangs in Chicago (Thrasher, 1927). However, by the 1940s, the migration of Blacks and Mexicans from the South made their way to Chicago and into the world of gangs. Almost immediately, Mexican and Black youth gangs were engaged in turf battles with Irish gangs. The Irish gangs felt these youth groups encroached on Irish controlled areas (Arredondo, 2004). Additionally, Mexican Americans experienced a great deal of racial discrimination at the hands of European immigrants (Fernández, 2005).

While Mexican Americans already had a small presence in Chicago, the first major migration of Mexican Americans to Chicago occurred in 1919 and continued until 1939 (Arredondo, 2004). Spergel and Grossman (1997) suggested that as Hispanic/Latino gangs grew, they eventually joined the ranks of Chicago’s most violent gangs (e.g., Latin Kings).

Similar to New York City's ethnic and racial gang developments, Black gangs also formed because of poverty, racial tensions, and violence. The need for protection and to defend their neighborhoods (i.e., turf), particularly against other White gangs such as the Irish, was a focal concern for Black gangs (Howell, 2012). As racial tension heated up in Chicago, the untimely death of an African-American teenager by a group of white youths sparked the Chicago race riots of 1919. As reported by a *Chicago Tribune* staff reporter,

They were separated by a line unseen and a law unwritten: The 29th Street beach was for whites, the 25th Street beach for blacks. An invisible boundary stretched from the sand into Lake Michigan, parting the races like Moses' staff parted the Red Sea. On this stifling hot summer Sunday, Eugene Williams, a black teenager, drifted south of that line while swimming with friends. Whites picked up rocks and let fly (Armstrong, 1919).

It was the Irish gangs that used violence and terror as a means to enforce their own Mason-Dixon Line and contained African-Americans in their overcrowded areas, while racial antagonism flowed prior to the riot. Ultimately, the riot resulted in the deaths of 15 whites, 23 blacks, more than 500 people injured, and over 1,000 black families had their homes destroyed by fire (History.com Staff, 2009).

The Chicago Riots of 1919 is also credited for a type of crime that is typically associated with gangs, drive-by shootings. White gang members would drive through black neighborhoods searching for black residents, firing at them, and then driving swiftly away. Similar to present day drive-by shootings, some residents who were shot and sometimes killed were not always the intended victims (Hagedorn, 2006). This was the only race riot that occurred between the Irish and any other ethnic/racial group. The Irish did not riot with the Italians, Poles, or Jews.

From 1910 to 1930, approximately 200,000 Blacks migrated from the south to Chicago (Tolnay, 2003). Thus, Chicago had the second largest urban black population in the United States (Miller, 2008). In 1930, 9 out of 10 African-Americans lived in areas that were at least 80% black and no other ethnic/racial group experienced poverty levels similar to this (Hagedorn, 2006). From the 1940s to the 1950s, the Black population in Chicago increased to around 500,000 (Miller, 2008). Many African-Americans in Chicago moved to an area known as the *Black Belt*. This was a geographic area along State Street on Chicago's South Side. It was estimated that about 375,000 blacks living in the *Black Belt* during the 1940s. Unfortunately, this area was only suitable for about 110,000 people (Miller, 2008), and crowded living conditions were a common way of life.

Out of poor economic conditions and racial conflicts with White gangs, three major Black street gangs formed in the latter part of the 1950s and early 1960s: the Devil's Disciples, Black P-Stones, and the Vice Lords (Cureton, 2009). The Vice Lords and the Black P-Stone Nation/Black Stone Rangers were formed in the Illinois State Reformatory School in 1958 and 1959, respectively (Knox & Papachristos, 2002). Eventually, the Devil's Disciples split into

three factions between 1960 and 1973: the Black Disciples led by David Barksdale, the Black Gangster Disciples led by Larry Hoover, and the Supreme Gangsters better known later as the Gangster Disciples (Cureton, 2009). Violence between these factions were severe and resulted in many unintended consequences:

By the early sixties, Chicago's Black street gangs had grown to such proportions that they not only posed a threat to themselves but to the Black community as well...were being perceived as predators who preyed on whomever they felt infringed on their lust for power [and] they turned to more criminal activities' and the control of turf became their number one priority . . . by controlling turf, gangs were able to exercise their muscles to extort monies from businesses and intimate the Black community (Perkins, 1987, p. 32).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the African-American “supergangs” emerged in Chicago (Cooley, 2011). The Black Stone Rangers (formed in 1959 from a nine-member street gang then called the Black Stone Raiders) and East Side Disciples inhabited the South Side and the Vice Lords claimed territory on the West Side (Cooley, 2011; McPherson, 1966; Sale, 1971). These gangs grew from small sets to large “nations” with leadership cadres and dues-paying members (Cooley, 2011). Some observers (e.g., Perkins, 1987) blamed these “supergangs” for rising crime rates and civil disorders in the Chicago areas. Meanwhile, despite efforts to instill Black pride in young people with the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the Black Panthers, those efforts had little impact on black gang members (Howell, 2012).

Interestingly, these gangs began to form along loose alliances that established two larger groups called the People Nation and the Folk Nation. The People and Folk Nations are not gangs per se but rather ideological alliances to which gangs belong (e.g., Latin Kings are a People Nation set; the Gangster Disciples are a Folk Nation set). According to the Illinois State Police (1992), Larry Hoover, leader of the Gangster Disciples, formed the Folk Nation in November of 1978, while incarcerated in an Illinois prison. Hoover envisioned a single gang and wanted to unite many of the gangs in Chicago. He created the idea for the alliance and persuaded many leaders of large Black, White, and Latino gangs from Chicago to join forces if there was even a need. Shortly after the Folk Nation was formed, rival gangs (Vice Lords and Latin Kings) formed the People Nation.

Today's Chicago Street Gangs

Today, law enforcement and other practitioners working gangs and addressing the gang problem agree that Chicago-based street gangs still align themselves with the Folk or People Nations, but these alliances do not account for much (Cureton, 2009; Maxson, 1998; Perkins, 1987). Despite the alliances, the gangs within each Nation still fight with one another. In fact, it is not uncommon to find some of the more popular Folk and People gangs like the Gangster Disciples and Latin kings in other parts of the country.

However, Chicago in the past five years has built a reputation for being the new “gang capital of the United States,” a title that had long belonged to the City of Los Angeles. In the past few years, Chicago has seen a significant rise in gang-related activities. The murder rate of Chicago in 2012 was nearly four times higher than that of New York City and more than 2.5 times higher than that of Los Angeles. But, Chicago’s population is three times smaller than that of New York City and nearly twice as small as Los Angeles’ population. In fact, Chicago had the highest number of homicides among cities with populations of more than one million in 2011. The record jumped to 532 murders in 2012 and recorded 413 in 2013. A significant portion of all those homicides were committed by gang members. Gang members in Chicago were responsible for 58.7% of all homicides in 2010 and 61% of all homicides in 2011. According to the Chicago Police Department (2011), 80% of all shootings and homicides in Chicago are gang related.

Currently, there are over 150,000 gang members in Chicago and approximately 12,000 police officers within the Chicago PD which has a gang task force of about 200 officers. The city of Chicago also witnessed a 25% increase in gang activity from 2009 to 2012 (NGC, 2015; NGIC, 2011). Gang experts claim that the reason for these staggering numbers showing an increase in gang-related activities are directly related to municipalities having to cut police department’s budgets, there are less police officers patrolling the streets, and “the historical hierarchy of Chicago-based street gangs has seemingly come undone, with various factions of former larger gangs all claiming territory, and clearly willing to shoot first at anyone unfamiliar who may be encroaching on said territory” (The Richest.com, 2014).

The West

The Emergence of Los Angeles Street Gangs

The City of Los Angeles was founded by the Spanish in 1781, and California became U.S. territory in 1848 and finally in 1850 became the 31st State. Railroad connections to the East Coast in the 1880s led to a rapid increase in the dominant white population. Soon, English-speaking Whites established control in California and the West, and as a result, many Mexicans lost their land holdings and were ultimately regulated to low-paying jobs (Allen & Turner, 2013). It was the cultural and geographical changes that contributed to gangs growing out of the preexisting Mexican culture in the West. Mexicans and other Hispanic/Latino groups who had traveled up from Mexico to populated areas such as El Paso, Texas, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Los Angeles, and California were seeking a better life (Howell, 2012). In the early 20th century, Los Angeles experienced major industrial and economic booms (e.g., railroad and agriculture) that demanded thousands of workers (Garcia, 1981), and Mexicans filled that need as the primary workforce (Sánchez, 1995).

Although research indicates that immigrating Mexican populations date back as far as the 16th century (Howell, 2012), it is difficult to determine the exact number of Mexicans entering the United States between the late 1800s and the early 1900s. It was not until the 1930 census that Mexicans were included in an immigration report. Officially, the Mexican population grew from approximately 367,000 in the early 1900s to about 700,000 by 1920 (Garcia, 1981). This population explosion was largely due to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), which accelerated Mexican immigration into the United States (Howell, 2012).

Prior to World War II, gangs were also not as prevalent as they later become in Southern California (Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 1997). Some of the research on gang-like groups indicates that these early gangs may have first appeared in the West as early as the 1890s (Rubel, 1965). Additionally, other research asserts that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 was an event that led to the presence of Mexican street gangs in Los Angeles and in other western regions of the United States (see also Vigil, 1998).

Vigil (1983) indicated that these earlier versions of street gangs in the West were what Rubel (1965) described as the tradition of *palomilla*. According to Rubel (1965), this was a coming-of-age cohort among young men:

The association to which I have reference is called a *palomilla*. *Palomillas* are curiously devoid of formal, let alone corporate, attributes; nevertheless, they represent a remarkably important aspect of the social organization of Mexiquito. Generically, *palomilla* refers to an ego-centric association of young males who interact with some frequency. The word itself is derived from the Spanish *paloma* (dove); thus, a *palomilla* has reference to a covey of doves and, by extension, a company of young men (p. 92–93).

Politics and Racial Tensions

Cultural differences were often confused with political dissent following World War II, particularly in southern California. For example, Japanese Americans were detained for suspected criminality while race riots raged on from New York to Los Angeles that ultimately reinforced racial barriers and segregation (Pagán, 2003). However, two critical events in southern California that further set the stage for the emergence of Los Angeles street gangs were fueled by racial tensions in the community. The first event was the Sleepy Lagoon murder of 1942. The Sleepy Lagoon murder surrounded events that occurred on August 1 and 2, 1942, between two gangs, the Downy Boys (a Caucasian gang) and the 38th Street gang (a Mexican-American gang) (Ramirez, 2009). The Sleepy Lagoon incident ended with the death of Jose Diaz and a trial in Los Angeles that concluded with the conviction of five young Mexican-American men, alleged members of the 38th Street gang (Pagán, 2003). Just five months later, the Zoot Suit Riot erupted.

The second was the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. The word “Zoot” which means something worn or performed in an extravagant style was a product of the Jazz era and the streets of Harlem, New York in the mid-1930s (Alford, 2004). The long-standing tensions between

military men and civilian youths played a role in the outbreak of the Zoot Suit Riots (Pagán, 2003; Mazón, 1984). For those Hispanic/Latinos, wearing zoot suits became a powerful symbol of pride, but it also represented deviance among the public's perceptions and stripping off zoot suits was an act of humiliation toward those rebellious minority youth (e.g., Peiss, 2011). The riot lasted five days.

The Emergence of Hispanic/Latino (Chicano) Street Gangs

In the 1920s, Mexicans (Chicanos) lived near the downtown area of Los Angeles. These settlement areas were called *cholo courts*. *Cholo courts* were “rundown shacks hastily and meagerly put together by immigrants” (Vigil, 1990, p. 116). This impoverished area is where some of the poorest people lived and this was where some of East Los Angeles' most notorious Mexican (Chicano) gangs and later other Hispanic/Latino gangs thrived (Vigil, 1990, 1998). For those gang members living in *cholo courts*, they were identified as *cholos* because of their style of dress, speech, gestures, tattoos, and graffiti. Researchers have noted that adolescent gang members who struggled to form an identity turned to the Mexican culture as a means to establish an identity and embraced it (Lopez & O'Donnell-Brummett, 2003). This pride and uniqueness to one's own heritage/ethnic group helped shape the Chicano gang lifestyle (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). Today, these *cholo courts* are referred to as *barrios*.

While some of these early Chicano street gangs were referred to as “boy gangs” (Bogardus, 1943), these “boy gangs” were the forerunners to the modern Chicano gangs of East Los Angeles (Shelden et al., 1997). Howell (2012) reported that the earliest and most firmly established gangs were established in *barrios*. These Chicano gangs only became visible after police and school officials reported conflicts between the barrio youths (Vigil & Long, 1990).

While immigration and the regeneration of a street gang subculture continues today, Southern California gangs were also fueled by the Vietnam War, the War on Poverty, and the Chicano movement (also called the Chicano Civil Rights Movement) of the 1960s and 1970s (Howell, 2012). As the Vietnam War depleted the *barrios* of generations of role models, the War on Poverty eliminated jobs, and the Chicano movement brought attention to the suffering *barrio* populations, gangs grew rapidly. According to Vigil (1990), “gang violence mushroomed in the aftermath of these events, for *choloization* did return to replace the War on Poverty, and street models began to reclaim their turf from activists and lead new generations of barrio youth” (p. 126).

The Emergence of Black Street Gangs

Like the Mexicans, Blacks from the South were also seeking a better life in the West, only to be confronted with racial tensions and segregation. As reported by Cureton (2009),

... the West was considered the land of prosperity because of employment opportunities in factories. In addition, the West appeared to offer an escape from Southern oppression, but the

reality was that it turned out to be fertile territory for traditional White supremacist ideology, institutional inequality (in housing, education, and employment), and restrictions relative to where Blacks could socialize . . . (p. 355).

Cureton (2009) contended that this segregation, as well as racial tensions and violence, fueled the growth of Black street gangs in Los Angeles and the *gangsterism* perspective. The presumption is that predatory Black male groups evolved from a variety of community transitional stages. From 1929 up through the 2000s, Blacks made their way to Los Angeles, and as they moved near White in urban areas, this sparked interracial conflict. As communities became more isolated and social disorganized, “street gangs became entrenched in the social fabric of the urban underclass. Marginalized male residents did not accept exclusion from mainstream society’s opportunities, so hustling drugs, guns, and stolen goods, prostituting women, and gambling became suitable alternatives for inclusion in a capitalistic, material-driven culture” (p. 352). Eventually, “neighborhoods became ganglands” and respect was the “social currency that governed street interaction and length of survival” (p. 352). *Gangsterism* is reflected in the “street protocol, dealing with enemies, the value of gang alliances, seizing control of turf, drug and gun distribution, and recreation” (p. 352). Essentially, the emergent *gangsterism* perspective hypothesizes that the community evolves into “hood” enclaves. Thus, the street gang was the most important social network organization for urban youth and the number one organization that male youth turned to negotiate manhood (Cureton, 2009).

Other researchers documented Black gang formation in Los Angeles differently. For example, Alonso (2004) reported that the late 1940s (residential segregation, police brutality, and racially motivated violence) and early 1970s (aftermath of the 1960s civil rights movements and assassinations of LA activists) were two periods of gang formation in South LA. Additionally, Bell and Jenkins (1991) reported that inner-city children were impacted by the exposure to chronic violence in the neighborhood. According to these authors, children who were exposed to violence are associated with later perpetration of violence (e.g., protection against victimization or retaliation for some prior incident). In the late 1940s, there were three racial riots that occurred: Manual Arts High in 1946, Canoga Park High in 1947, and John Adams High in 1949 (Vigil, 2002). Historically, these schools were primarily turf battle grounds for gangs:

Black gangs, until the 1970s tended to be predominantly defined by school-based turfs rather than by the microscopically drawn neighborhood territorialities of Chicano gangs. Furthermore, early South Central gangs such as the Businessmen, Slausons, Gladiators, Farmers, Parks, Outlaws, Watts, Boot Hill, Rebel Rousers, Roman Twenties served also as the architects of social space in new and usually hostile settings. As tens of thousands of 1940s and 1950s Black immigrants crammed into the overcrowded, absentee-landlord-dominated neighborhoods of the ghetto’s Eastside, low-rider gangs offered cool worlds of urban socialization for poor young newcomers from rural Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi (Davis, 1992, p. 311).

Unlike the Mexican gangs, Black gangs were not geographically located in restricted areas (e.g., barrios). Black gangs encompassed wider areas, and because of this lack of geographic restriction, Black gangs appear to have evolved out of Black–White racial conflicts (Howell, 2012). In addition, antagonism from White youth groups (e.g., Spook Hunters) manifested into racial hate crimes. Essentially, Black males had learned that sticking together proved a successful coping strategy. Therefore, brotherhoods such as the Slausons, Farmers, Businessmen, Gladiators, Watts Gang, and Devil Hunters were formed to defend Black legitimacy (Cureton, 2009). These Black defense groups, which were initially liberators or pioneers, defended their home turf as well as expanded their territory by traveling to battle White youth groups. However, “the African American community suffered from poor schools, housing, and unemployment which was three times the national average” (National Geographic Channel [NatGeo], 2009) and like the Chicago race riots of 1919, the 1965 Watts riot gave birth to a variety of new Black street gangs. The two most famous and widely known are the Crips and the Bloods.

The origins of the Crips are heavily disputed. Historians reported that after the Watts riot, Raymond Washington started a local gang with 10 of his friends and called themselves “the Cribs” (NatGeo, 2009). It was suggested that the name was eventually changed to Crips because gang members began carrying around canes to display their “pimp” status. Also, in a *Los Angeles Sentinel* article, February 1972, referred to some members as “Crips” (for cripples). Other reports suggest that Bunchy Carter, a former Black Panther president, and Raymond Washington were the primary founders of the Crips (Cureton, 2009). Meanwhile, the movie *Tales of the Crypt* became the inspiration for the name “Crip” because the gang members “wanted to convey that just as dead people were placed in crypts, anyone messed with them—the Crips—would end up in one also” (Greenan, Britz, Rush, & Barker, 2000, p. 124). Lastly, it is suggested that high-school students, Raymond Washington and Stanley “Tookie” Williams started the Crips as a means of protecting themselves and their friends from other gangs in the area who were committing crimes (Dunn, 1999). Regardless of how the Crips originated, what is not disputed is the Bloods street gang were formed as a reaction to the Crips.

The Crips and Bloods have loosely structured and unstructured “sets” that are mostly from specific neighborhoods in South Central Los Angeles. Typically, gang members dress in a distinctive fashion, display colors (blue associated with Crips and red with Bloods), and have unique symbols (e.g., graffiti, hand signs) that identify who they are. Alonso (2004) reported that “Crip identity took over the streets of South LA and swept Southside schools in an epidemic of gang shootings and street fights by 1972 when there were 18 Black gangs in LA County” (p. 669). However, Robert Walker, a former Special Agent for the DEA and gang expert, indicated that “by the end of 1972, every area of South Central Los Angeles, including Compton, East Compton, Florence, Firestone, Athens, Willowbrook and Carson had been divided up and was totally saturated with a street gang presence” (Walker, n.d.). Walker also noted that *Crip* street gangs were in place by late 1971. By 1978, the gangs had multiplied to 60, and by the 1990s, there were more than 270 gangs in the Los Angeles County area (Howell, 2012).

Today's Los Angeles Street Gangs

California, primarily Los Angeles and the surrounding communities, have produced some of America's most notorious gangs: the Bloods and Crips; prison gangs (STGs) such as La Eme, La Nuestra Familia, and the Aryan Brotherhood; 18th Street gang and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang; and the Tiny Rascals (Asian gang). In fact, the City of Los Angeles was considered the "gang capital of the world" for decades.

The most significant and recognizable Black gangs in the West are the Bloods and Crips. The Bloods membership is estimated between 5,000 and 20,000 gang members while the Crips membership is significantly larger estimated between 30,000 and 35,000 gang members (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Crips and Bloods subscribe to territorial ownership, material acquisition, money, power, social status, and respect. In the early 1980s, lethal violence became the preferred method to seize control of territory, drugs (primarily cocaine), and guns (Cureto, 2009).

The most significant Mexican-American- and Hispanic/Latino-based street gangs in the West are Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), 18th Street gang, and Florencia 13. MS-13 and the 18th Street gang have garnered the most public fear, prompting the FBI to create a special task force to deal with these two gangs. Other Hispanic/Latino/Chicano gangs include the Norteños (Norte14) and Sureños (Sur13) who have also significantly grown in Northern and Southern California, respectively (FBI, 2011). Additionally, as reported in the FBI's 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment report, Asian gangs are also involved in a host of criminal activities that include violent crime, drug and human trafficking, and white-collar crime.

The South

Unlike the emergent gang problems of the Northeast, Midwest, and West, the South region has a much broader scope to the gang phenomenon with no one city serving as the focal point like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. While the South lacked a central large city that would have provided a springboard for gang growth, opinions differ over what role big city gangs have in the emergence of youth gangs in smaller cities. Zevitz and Takata (1992) reported that little empirical evidence exists to support or refute the big city gang connection and concluded that gang development is the result of the outgrowth of underlying social and economic conditions in a community, not the product of big city street gang diffusion. Regardless of the big city versus small city gang influence debate, prior to the 1970s gangs were not perceived as a threat in the South. Most cities in Texas, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana did report delinquent and criminal activities but described these activities as disruptive local groups rather than gangs (Howell, 2012). However, in Walter Miller's (1975) first multi-city gang study, Miami, Florida, and San Antonio, Texas, were identified as cities with a serious gang problem. By the mid- to late 1990s, southern states recorded an increase in the numbers of new gangs where approximately 200 cities with populations of 100,000 or more reported youth gang problems (Miller,

2001). Florida (23%), South Carolina (15%), Alabama (12%), and Texas (8%) saw an increase in the number of gangs in their states (Howell & Griffiths, 2016).

Today, Houston, Texas, and Miami, Florida, have emerged as a major gang center for the South region with New Orleans and Atlanta not far behind (Howell, 2016). As gang homicide increase in the South and drug trafficking continues to be a major problem for law enforcement, many of these gangs, particularly in Texas, have some connection to Texas prison gangs/STGs (e.g., the Texas Syndicate, the Mexican Mafia, and Tango Blast) (Morgan & Shelley, 2014). One prison gang, the Tango Blast, similar to the Mexican Mafia in the California penal system, has close ties to Houston and is well established inside the Texas prison system. According to a *Houston Chronicle* article,

Houston has about 21,000 gang members, police said, with about one-quarter to one-third affiliated with a group called “Tango Blast Houston.” That loose affiliation of Hispanic ex-prison inmates is part of a larger statewide gang and identified as a “top threat” (Glenn, 2014, para. 3).

The Latin Disciples, Hoover Crips, Bounty Hunters, Southwest *Cholos*, Bloods, and Mara Salvatrucha are among the other major gangs in the Houston area. While some have unique ties to Houston, others have either borrowed the symbols, colors, and names from Chicago- and Los Angeles-based street gangs or gang members themselves who arrived from Chicago and Los Angeles to Houston and established a “set” in the area and expanded the gangs’ illegal activities.

Other Gangs and Gang Trends

Hybrid Gangs

By the late 1980s and 1990s, law enforcement was faced with new types of gangs, hybrid gangs, Asian gangs, and Native American gangs. Hybrid gangs are essentially a mixture of racial and ethnic groups that often “cut and paste” bits of gang imagery and big city gang lore into their local versions of gangs, while other gangs are home grown (Howell, 2007). According to Starbuck, Howell, and Lindquist (2001),

Hybrid gang culture is characterized by members of different racial/ethnic groups participating in a single gang, individuals participating in multiple gangs, unclear rules or codes of conduct, symbolic associations with more than one well-established gang (e.g., use of colors and graffiti from different gangs), cooperation of rival gangs in criminal activity, and frequent mergers of small gangs (p. 1).

Additionally, hybrid gangs tend to have the following nontraditional features: (1) they may or may not have an allegiance to a traditional gang color; (2) local gangs may adopt the symbols of large gangs in more than one city; (3) gang members may change their affiliation from one gang

to another; or (4) it is not uncommon for a gang member to claim multiple affiliations, sometimes involving rival gangs (Starbuck et al., 2001). Early American gangs were homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity, but immigration, the mobility of gangs, and the diffusion of gang culture have contributed to the emergence of hybrid (cosmopolitan) gangs (Howell, 2012).

Asian Gangs

Asian gangs are typically located in the West, but there are pockets of Asian gangs in the Midwest (Minneapolis) and the East Coast (New York) and are composed of several independent identities that are mostly Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, or Vietnamese. The origins of Asian youth gangs are not that different from other gangs. Toy (1992) indicated that it is not the cultural conflict and social factors that influenced deviant behavior or the collapse of traditional family, but in fact, the victimization committed by other ethnic groups that led to gang membership among Asians. Vigil (2002) stated that Asian gangs, primarily Vietnamese, draw the most attention because they are different when compared to Black and Hispanic/Latino gangs. Asian gangs have a more fluid structure and are not concerned so much with territorial as traditional as Black and Hispanic/Latino gangs. This difference is elaborated by the FBI:

Although often considered street gangs, Asian gangs operate similar to Asian Criminal enterprises with a more structured organization and hierarchy. They are not turf-oriented like most African-American and Hispanic street gangs and typically maintain a low profile to avoid law enforcement scrutiny. Asian gang members are known to prey on their own race and often develop a relationship with their victims before victimizing them (NGIC, 2011, p. 18).

However, the gang structure is changing as some law enforcement agencies attribute recent Asian gang membership to the recruitment of non-Asian members in order to compete more effectively with other street gangs for territory and dominance of illicit markets. In fact, Asian gang members in California are reported to maintain marijuana cultivation houses and pay members of the Asian community to reside in them (NGIC, 2011).

Native American Gangs

Native American gangs are another type of gang that provides a unique challenge for law enforcement and those interested in examining the extent of the problem on Indian reservations. First, tribal police are relatively small when compared to the geographic size of their jurisdiction. For example, there are approximately 200 Navajo Nation police officers responsible for patrolling over 27,000 square miles. Second, Native Americans are typically not open to outside researchers to conduct studies on Indian Reservations. Lastly, national-level gangs such as the Bloods, Crips, Norteños, Sureños, and many Mexican drug cartels are using Indian Reservation as a base to move drugs because of the lack of police presence and the vastness of the land (FBI, 2011).

The documentation of Native American gangs is sparse, as most studies did not emerge until the 1990s, and focused on individual tribes on Indian Reservations (see Hailer & Hart, 1999; Henderson, Kunitz, & Levy, 1999; Nielsen, Zion, & Hailer, 1998). It was not until 2000 that the first comprehensive study focusing on gangs in Indian Country was initiated by the Nation Youth Gang Center (currently known as the National gang Center) (see Major & Egley, 2002). Major and Egley (2002) reported that 74% of law enforcement serving tribal areas had not experienced gang problems until after 1990. Today, estimates on the number of Native American gangs are sketchy or outdated as gathering data has proven to be difficult for researchers and law enforcement officials. Although there had been substantial anecdotal evidence of increasing gang activity among American Indian populations, no recent national studies provided reliable data about the levels of participation (Clarke, 2002). However, what law enforcement and gang experts have noted is the Native American gang population has increased on Indian Reservations and in the U.S. prison system (Grant, 2013; NGIC, 2011).

In one study conducted by the University of Minnesota, the researchers found 14,000 youth in 50 tribes located in 12 states, where 15% of American Indian youth on reservations reported some level of gang activity (Children, Youth and Family Consortium, 1992). It was also reported that younger teens participate in gang activity at higher levels than older teens (Children, Youth and Family Consortium, 1992).

In 1997, the Navajo Nation estimated that approximately 60 youth gangs existed in Navajo country (Henderson et al., 1999). Henderson et al. (1999) concluded that there was a wide variability among youth who identified themselves as gang members. The authors did note that some gangs were simply street corner groups while others had hardened members. As with other ethnic groups, sociodemographic conditions were the contributing factors in creating an environment for gang formation. Additionally, Henderson et al. (1999) concluded that “gang prevention is not simply, or even fundamentally, a law enforcement issue, it is a public health issue in the broadest sense” (p. 258). However, this study was primarily based on individual accounts, interviews, and law enforcement data (Freng, 2013).

As of 2000, 23% of law enforcement agencies reported active gangs, which comprised primarily of juveniles males, 40% of communities responded that their community had active gangs, and most communities had one to five gangs. Finally, based on 1997 data, it was estimated that there were 4,500 gang members and roughly 400 gangs on or near tribal lands (Freng, 2013).

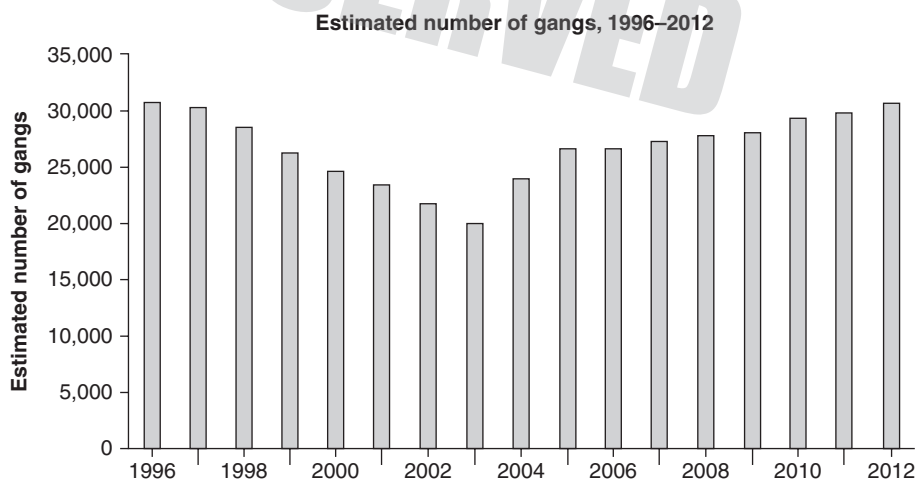
Typically, Native American gang members emulate national-level gangs such as the Bloods, Crips, Norteños, and Sureños. They also borrow many of the common identifiers such as colors, signs, symbols, and names. However, some Native gangs are formed with specific to their culture and heritage such as the Native Mob and Native Pride, which both

primarily operate in the Upper Midwest (North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin). The Native Mob and Native Pride were also originally formed in the U.S. prison system and then expanded onto reservations. Although most gang in Indian Country are disorganized and lack significant structure, Native American gangs have provided national-level gangs and drug cartels a haven for drug trafficking because the police are understaffed and underfunded and large geographic areas of the Reservations make it difficult to patrol.

Current Gang Trends

Today, there are an estimated 850,000 to 1.4 million gang members in the United States and over 30,000 identified gangs (National Gang Center, 2015). According to the National Gang Center, which surveys law enforcement agencies annually regarding the number of active gang members in their jurisdictions, reported an 8.6% increase from 2013 to 2014. In the past decade, annual estimates of the number of gang members have averaged around 770,000 nationally. While the National Gang Center attempts to identify the number of gang members in the United States, other researchers suggest that there are an estimated 1,059,000 juvenile gang members alone, representing 2.0% (about 1 of every 50 juveniles) of persons between the ages 5 to 17 years in the U.S. population (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). Figure 1.2 shows the estimated number of gangs since 1996.

Figure 1.2: Estimate of gang members in the U.S. National Gang Center.



Source: National Gang Center (2015).

Concluding Thoughts

Gangs have been emerging and evolving in U.S. cities since the early 1800s. As gangs first emerged in New York City around the 1820s, the cities of Chicago and Los Angeles were not far behind. Immigration was the impetus to help create local gangs but eventually racial and ethnic differences, social conditions, and violence contributed to the formation of larger and more sophisticated gangs. Since New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles are most noted for their gang activities and the birth of some famous street gangs like the Forty Thieves, Dead Rabbits, Pug Uglies, the Bloods, the Crips, Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, and Latin Kings, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the South would begin to experience a significant presence of gangs. New waves of immigration also gave birth to hybrid and other types of gangs, and researchers and law enforcement officials began to take notice of Asian and Native American gangs. Socioeconomic conditions, racial tension, immigration, migration, cultural clashes, industry, and peer relationships all have played a part in the emergence of gang life in the United States.

Most gangs tend to be organized by geography and many are formed around racial or ethnic origin and heritage. One very distinct feature about gangs is that they are predominately male. According to Campbell (1990), males make up the vast majority of gang membership, but female participation in gangs is increasing. Gangs tend to concentrate in communities where there is low-income, public-housing projects and in the urban section of the city that consists of poor black and Hispanic/Latinos. It is no secret that these areas provide peer associations which take on great importance for adolescents. Today, the formation of gangs is an extension of those early immigrants who formed gangs because they needed to support one another and also to ensure that the right politicians would win elections, always for a price. Early immigrants faced many obstacles adjusting to life in America and politics was one way to get ahead in life. Today, adolescent peer groups join gangs for the need of peer acceptance, belonging, safety, power, and the excitement (Spergel et al., 1994). Gangs are also more widespread and diverse and are now found in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

As distinct as each gang region is in the United States from one another, the culture of the gang is similar. The world of gangs is engulfed by drugs, weapons, violence, and money. Each day, law enforcement combats the growing gang problem in large and small communities alike. Nonetheless, each region's gang culture is continually impacted by waves of immigrants and U.S. border policy politics, primarily in the West and Southern states that border Mexico. These regional differences clearly show that one should not assume that the gang dynamics are the same across each region. In fact, as gang scholar and expert James Howell (2012) has sternly expressed, "sweeping generalizations are ill-advised" (p. 25).

Discussion Questions:

1. What role did the racial/ethnic conflict play in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the south in the development of street gangs?
2. How and why is immigration important to the emergence of gangs in any particular area?
3. Why is gang emergence in the South different from the cities discussed?
4. What impact did sociodemographics have on the emergence of gangs?
5. What impact did politics have on the emergence of gangs?

Web Links:

1. Federal Bureau of Investigation—Gangs
http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/gangs
2. National Gang Center (formerly the National Youth Gang Center)
<http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/>
3. National Gang Crime Research Center
<http://www.ngcrc.com/>
4. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
<http://www.ojjdp.gov/>

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