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# Gang-Related Gun Violence

## Socialization, Identity, and Self

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Few studies have examined how violent norms are transmitted in street gangs.
The purpose of this research is to add to the gang-related literature by examin-
ing socialization as the mechanism between street gang membership and vio-
lence. To explore this issue, we draw upon in-depth interviews with twenty-two
inmates convicted of gang-related gun violence. We find that the gangs are
important agents of socialization that help shape a gang member's sense of self
and identity. In addition, inmates reported to us that whereas guns offered them
protection, they were also important tools of impression management that
helped to project and protect a tough reputation. Our findings provide greater
insight into the way gang socialization leads to gun-related violence and has
implications for policies aimed at reducing that violence.

*Keywords:* gang socialization; gang violence; gun use; gang identity; rep-
utation; masculinity; respect

This study considers how gangs promote violence and gun use. We
argue that socialization is important because it helps to shape a gang
member's identity and sense of self. Moreover, guns often help gang
members project their violent identities. As Kubrin (2005, 363) argues,
"The gun becomes a symbol of power and a remedy for disputes." We
examine the issue of gang socialization, self, and identity formation using
data derived from face-to-face qualitative interviews with a sample of gang
members who have been incarcerated in Colorado prisons for gun-related
violent crimes. Our findings, although unique, emphasize what previous
studies have found—that most gangs are organized by norms that support

the use of violence to settle disputes, achieve group goals, recruit members, and defend identity.

Prior to our analysis of gang members, we briefly review the literature on the relationship between gangs, crime, guns, and violence. In that review, we emphasize the importance of socialization and the impact of gangs on identity and self. We explain how guns help gang members shape and convey their identity. Finally, in our discussion we relate our findings to the relative efficacy of different intervention strategies that are focused on reducing gang violence.

## Gangs and Violence

Research suggests that gang members are more likely than non-gang members to engage in crime—especially violent crime (Gordon et al. 2004). According to Thornberry et al. (1993, 75), the relationship between gang affiliation and violence "is remarkably robust, being reported in virtually all American studies of gang behavior regardless of when, where, or how the data were collected." Whereas the relationship between gangs and violence is pervasive, "little is known about the causal mechanisms that bring it about" (Thornberry et al. 1993, 76). Do gangs attract individuals who are predisposed to violence or do they create violent individuals? The debate in the literature about these explanations of gang violence is rather extensive.

Thornberry et al. (1993) point out that there are three perspectives that inform the debate concerning the relationship between gangs and violence. First, the selection perspective argues that gang members are individuals who are delinquent and violent prior to joining the gang. Thus, gang members are individuals who are likely to engage in violent and deviant behavior even if they are not gang members (Gerrard 1964, Yablonsky 1962). From this perspective, what makes gang members more criminal than non-gang members is that criminal individuals have self-selected or been recruited into gangs. The second perspective is known as the social facilitation perspective. This perspective argues that gang members are no different from non-gang members until they enter the gang. Therefore, the gang serves a normative function. In short, the gang is the source of delinquent behavior because new gang members are socialized into the norms and values of gang life, which provides the necessary social setting for crime and violence to flourish. The enhancement perspective is the third explanation for the relationship between gang and crime (Thornberry et al. 1993). The enhancement perspective proposes that new gang members are recruited from a pool of individuals who

show propensity to engage in crime and violence, but their level of violence intensifies once they enter the gang because the gang provides a structure that encourages crime and violence (see also Decker and Van Winkle 1996).

According to McCorkle and Miethe (2002, 111) the second and third explanations for gang-related crime are the most popular explanations in the literature because both perspectives rely on the assumption that social disorganization increases socialization into the gang subculture, which produces crime. Recent criminological research suggests that the enhancement perspective is the most likely explanation for the association between gang involvement and criminal behavior. For instance, Gordon et al. (2004) discovered that individuals who join gangs are, in general, more delinquent than their peers *before* they join the gang. However, Gordon et al. also found that violent behavior among individuals who join a gang significantly increases *after* they become gang members. Although Gordon et al.'s work provides some answers concerning the potential causal mechanisms of gang violence, it still leaves open the question about why gang members increase their violent behavior after they join a gang. It is for that reason that we focus our research on the concept of socialization as a mechanism that leads to gang-related gun violence.

## Gang Socialization

Research on gang socialization—the process of learning the appropriate values and norms of the gang culture to which one belongs—suggests that group processes are highly important (Sirpal 1997, Vigil 1988, Miller and Brunson 2000). In addition, Moore (1991) believes that many city gangs have become quasi-institutionalized. In these cities, gangs have played a major role in ordering individuals' lives at the same time that other important social institutions such as schools and families play less of a normative role (see also Blumstein 1995; Bowker and Klein 1983; Bjerregaard and Lizotte 1995; Vigil 1988). Vigil (1988, 63) has found that gangs help to socialize "members to internalize and adhere to alternative norms and modes of behavior and play a significant role in helping . . . youth acquire a sense of importance, self-esteem, and identity." One way to attain status is to develop a reputation for being violent (Anderson 1999). This reputation for violence, however, is likely to develop (at least to some degree) after an individual joins a gang.

The reasons individuals join gangs are diverse (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). According to Decker and Van Winkle (1996), the most important instrumental reason for joining a gang is protection. In addition to instrumental

concerns, a large portion of all gang members indicate that their gang fulfills a variety of more typical adolescent needs—especially companionship and support, which tend to be more expressive in nature. That is, the gang is a primary group. The idea that the gang is a primary group into which individuals are socialized is not new. For instance, long ago Thrasher (1927, 230) pointed out,

> [The gang] offers the underprivileged boy probably his best opportunity to acquire status and hence it plays an essential part in the development of his personality. In striving to realize the role he hopes to take he may assume a tough pose, commit feats of daring or vandalism, or become a criminal.

Thus, gang violence may often be viewed as expressive in nature. The value of masculinity as a form of expression plays an important role in gang socialization (Miller and Decker 2001). Oliver (1994) argues that gang violence is often a method of expressing one's masculinity when opportunities to pursue conventional roles are denied. Acts of manhood, note Decker and Van Winkle (1996, 186), are "important values of [a member's] world and their psyches—to be upheld even at the cost of their own or others' lives." Katz (1988) also believes violence plays an important and acceptable role in the subculture of people living in socially isolated environments and economically deprived areas because violence provides a means for a member to demonstrate his toughness, and displays of violent retaliation establish socialization within the gang.

According to Short and Strodtbeck (1965; see also Howell 1998), a good portion of all gang violence can be attributed to threats to one's status within the gang. Gang membership, then, helps to create within-group identity that defines how group members perceive people outside their formal organizational structure. By way of altercasting (i.e., the use of tactics to create identities and roles for others), gangs cast nonmembers into situated roles and identities that are to the gang's advantage (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963). Altercasting, then, is an aggressive tactic that gangs often use to justify their perception of other gangs as potentially threatening rivals, and it is used to rationalize the use of physical violence against other gangs. If the objective of a gang is to be perceived by the community, rival gangs, law enforcement officials, and others in a particular way, then their collective group and individual identities will be situated in these defining situations. Even though there is a good deal of research examining the important relationship between violence and status within the gang as it relates to socialization, little is known about the specific ways that status impacts gang violence.

Socialization into the gang is bound up in issues of identity and self. Identity, according to Stone (1962), is the perceived social location of the person. Image, status, and a host of other factors that affect identity are mostly created by group perceptions of who we are and how we define ourselves. "People see themselves from the standpoints of their group and appropriate action in relation to those groups becomes a source of pride" (Shibutani 1961, 436). Berger (1963, 92) notes that "identities are socially bestowed, socially maintained, and socially transformed."

Moore (1978, 60) has suggested that "the gang represents a means to what is an expressive, rather than an instrumental, goal: the acting out of a male role of competence and of 'being in command' of things." The findings of Decker and Van Winkle (1996) and Moore suggest that although instrumental reasons for joining a gang are important, once a member joins a gang they largely see the gang as an important primary group that is central to their lives and heavily influences their identity and personality. Because this is a primary group, the approval of gang peers is highly important. It is this expressive reason for remaining in a gang that may help to explain gang crime and violence, especially as it relates to socialization. Hughes and Short (2005) provide insight into the area of identity and gang violence. Specifically, they find that when a gang member's identity is challenged, violence is often a result—especially if the challenger is a stranger. If a gang member does not comply with gang role expectations when they are challenged, the result may be a loss of respect. It is important to project a violent reputation to command respect and deter future assaults. Walking away from conflict is risky to one's health (Anderson 1999). Gang members must by necessity make efforts to show a continued commitment to role expectations to the group (Lindesmith and Strauss 1968). From this perspective, it appears that character traits that are a consequence of being socialized into street gangs may result in youthful acts of violence through transformations in identity (Vigil 1996).

Initiation rights are one important aspect of identity formation (Hewitt 1988, Vigil 1996). Initiation rights that new gang members are obligated to go through demonstrate commitment to the gang and attest to an individual's desire to gain official membership in the organization. Hewitt (1988) argues that these types of acts help create a "situated self," where a person's self can be defined and shaped by particular situations. Thus, notions of identity formation are highly consistent with notions of gang violence as a function of social facilitation and enhancement perspectives in that they explain why gang members may increase their levels of crime and violence once they join the gang. Moreover, research suggests that the more significant the relationship to

a gang is, the more committed an individual is to a gang identity (Callero 1985; Stryker and Serpe 1982). In short, gangs provide a reference group for expected role behavior and shape a member's identity and sense of self (Callero 1985). The greater the commitment a person has to a gang identity, the more frequently that person will perform in ways that enact that identity, ways that include acts of violence (Stryker and Serpe 1982).

Guns also play an important role in many gangs and are often reported to be owned for instrumental reasons (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Gang members who perceive a threat from rival gangs are believed to carry guns to protect themselves and their neighborhoods (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Horowitz 1983; Lizotte et al. 1994; Wright and Rossi 1986). Gang membership "strongly and significantly increases the likelihood of carrying a gun" (Thornberry et al. 2003, 131). However, the reason that gang members carry guns is sill unclear. It is likely that in addition to instrumental reasons for carrying a gun, gang members carry guns for expressive reasons (Sheley and Wright 1995). That is, guns provide gang members with a sense of power, which may be extremely important in identity formation. Guns help gang members project a tough image. Thornberry et al. (2003, 125) report that gang members who carry guns may feel "emboldened to initiate criminal acts that they may otherwise avoid."

Sociologists have long recognized that symbols are important indicators of identity. This is especially true of gangs (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Vigil 2003). Gang members often display symbols of gang membership, and this is part of being socialized into the role of a gang member:

> Wearing gang clothes, flashing gang signs, and affecting other outward signs of gang behavior are also ways to become encapsulated in the role of gang member, especially through the perceptions of others, who, when they see the external symbols of membership respond as if the person was a member (Decker and Van Winkle 1996, 75).

Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995, 42) argue that it is plausible that "juveniles are socialized into the gun culture by virtue of their gang membership and activity."

Although there is some indication that gang members are more likely to own guns than non-gang members prior to joining a gang, gang membership also clearly appears to increase the prevalence of gun ownership. Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) believe that future research needs to focus on why gang membership encourages gun ownership. In this vein, Sanders's (1994) research on

drive-by shootings provides some insight into why gang membership may encourage gun ownership. Drawing on Goffman's (1961) notion of realized resources, Sanders argues that gangs are organizations that provide the necessary context for drive-bys. Sanders is clear when he states that guns and cars are the least important resource in producing drive-bys. However, it is also true that guns are necessary for drive-bys to occur and as such are an important part of gang culture to the extent that drive-bys help gang members "build an identity as having heart" (Sanders 1994, 204). Thus, notions of character and identity provide a way to look at drive-by shootings as a product of the gang structure, where guns are important instruments in building identity. Given the importance of guns to a gang member's identity, it is interesting to note that little research exists that examines the relationship between guns and gangs in terms of identity formation.

## Methods

The interviews in this study of twenty-two gang members were taken from a larger qualitative study of seventy-five Colorado prison inmates who used a firearm in the commission of their most recent offense. Inmates were asked general questions about their families, schools, peer groups, neighborhoods, prior contact with the criminal justice system, and experiences with firearms. They were also asked a series of questions surrounding the circumstances that lead up to the crime for which they were currently incarcerated. It was from this vantage point that we began to see the importance of gang socialization, self, and identity as important aspects of violence and gun use.

Inmates we interviewed were located in eleven different correctional facilities scattered throughout Colorado and were randomly selected by means of a simple random sample from a list of all inmates incarcerated for a violent crime in which a firearm was involved. The overall sample was composed of 39.1% whites, 40.6% African Americans, 15.6% Hispanics, and 4.7% Asians and Middle Easterners. Eight percent of our subjects were female. The demographics of the inmates in our study correspond closely to the demographics of inmates incarcerated in Colorado prisons (see Colorado Department of Corrections 2005).

We used official inmate case files located at the Colorado Department of Corrections to verify that the twenty-two self-identified gang members were likely to have actually been gang members prior to their incarceration. That validity check substantiated what our subjects said—they did indeed

appear to be gang members. Case files were also used to gain information about offenders' past criminal records to determine the validity of each inmate's responses with respect to previous offending patterns as well as characteristics associated with their most current offense.

During the interview process, we made every effort to ensure that inmates understood that our conversations were both voluntary and confidential. We told each inmate that only we would be able to identify their answers and that any information they provided to us would be used only for research-related purposes. Moreover, we informed inmates that if they were uncomfortable with any of the topics of discussion, they could simply tell us that they felt uncomfortable and we would proceed to other topics of interest. Finally, we emphasized that we did not want any details that might compromise an inmate's pending legal case. It is important to point out that we did discover—through our conversations with inmates—that those subjects who refused to be interviewed were mainly concerned about legal repercussions associated with our interviews. Still, we have good reason to believe that the inmates we did interview were surprisingly open and honest about their past behavior. Again, we are confident in the validity of our data because inmates often gave answers that closely matched available information recorded in their official inmate files. Finally, we should point out that a few inmates who felt uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning asked the interviewer to momentarily turn off the tape recorder so that their responses were not recorded. These brief, unrecorded conversations were often focused on a particular aspect of an inmate's crime and are largely inconsequential to the current research.

The appendix lists the characteristics of the inmates in our gang sub-sample. The median age of the twenty-two gang members in our sample was 25 years old, though their age at the commission of the crime was considerably younger. Thirteen of the inmates were black, five were white, one was Asian, and three were Hispanic. Six of the inmates we interviewed were convicted of murder or nonnegligent manslaughter, four were convicted of attempted murder, two were convicted of robbery, eight were convicted of assault, and two were convicted of kidnapping. At the time of the interviews, our subjects had been incarcerated for an average of 4.7 years. All but one of the inmates in our sample of gang members were male, and all subjects used a handgun in the commission of their most recent violent crime.

In order to arrange times to interview inmates, we sent a letter to the case worker of each inmate we selected into our sample. The purpose of these letters was to (1) identify the inmates selected for inclusion in our study, (2) explain the nature of the study, and (3) indicate that inmate participation in the study was voluntary. Correctional case workers were asked to provide

inmates with information about the study, tell them that their participation was voluntary, and inform them of the dates that the researchers would be at the prison to conduct interviews. We also informed subjects that as an incentive to participate in the interview, we would put five dollars into their inmate account.

Prison officials were notified of our visits prior to our arrival, and they helped us locate the inmates in our sample and arrange for a place for the interviews to be conducted. All interviews were conducted in the prison in private conference rooms, vacant staff offices, and empty visitation rooms. Each interview was tape-recorded with the subjects' consent and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. A semistructured format was used that relied on sequential probes to pursue leads provided by the inmates. This technique allowed subjects to identify and elaborate important domains they perceived to characterize their life histories. Generally, these included their gang experience, engagement in violent encounters throughout their life, and their involvement with a firearm in those situations.

The interview tapes were transcribed for qualitative data analysis, which involves scanning and identifying general statements about relationships among categories of observations. We looked for explanations concerning gang members' perceptions about how they learned to become gang members and their perceptions of the importance of guns in that process. Thus, we used an inductive-methods approach where the inmates' responses directed our empirical generalizations and conclusions. As Schatzman and Strauss (1973, 110) note, "the most fundamental operation in the analysis of qualitative data is that of discovering significant classes of things, persons, and events and the properties which characterize them." Our face-to-face interviews allowed our subjects to elaborate on important domains they perceived to characterize their criminal life history as it related to their perceptions of gang involvement.

It is important to point out that although we would have preferred to conduct and establish a long-term relationship with our subjects and observe their behavior as they went about their daily lives, such an approach is, unfortunately, highly unrealistic in the case of the most violent gang members. This is important as there are some researchers who believe that ethnography excludes qualitative research approaches where the researcher has not spent a long period of time observing study participants in the field in order to become sufficiently knowledgeable of the setting being studied (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). We, however, agree with Lofland and Lofland (1995, 18) that the distinction between participant observation and intensive interviewing is "overdrawn and any invidious comparisons are [typically] unwarranted." Moreover,

Hobs and May (1993) suggest that in-depth interviews are the best way to gather data that could never be obtained just by observing the activities of people. Given the fact that intensive interviews are often part of participant observation, we argue that they are sufficient to draw conclusions regarding gang socialization and the creation of a gang identity among the gang members in our sample—those who find themselves incarcerated for violent crimes.

One potential methodological issue that could be interpreted as cause for concern has to do with the generalizability of our sample. The gang members we talked with were probably more highly integrated into their gang than the typical gang member. We believe this because our subjects were incarcerated for gang-related violence, which we interpreted as a sign of high commitment to their group. Thus, we should expect that our subjects' gang experiences are quite different from gang members in general who have not displayed similar levels of violence. Such selection bias might be problematic if the purpose of the study is to generalize our findings to all gang members. The purpose of this research, however, is more modest in nature. We are interested in the experiences of violent gang members in our sample precisely because they are likely to be the most committed to the gang and because that commitment is likely to be translated into gang-related gun violence. As studies of gang violence indicate, a large percentage of gang violence is committed by a small percentage of gang members. (Piehl, Kennedy, and Braga 2000, 100). The gang members in our study, then, are likely to have the most to offer in terms of their gang and gun experiences, and their stories are likely to be the most useful in thinking about policy-related issues surrounding gang- and gun-related violence.

## Findings

We divide our findings into four sections. First, we focus on our subjects' socialization into the gang and the impact that socialization has on their self and identity. Second, we explore the importance of gang commitment as reinforcing a gang member's self and identity. Third, we focus on masculinity as a central value among gang members. During our discussions of masculinity, gang members often referred to notions of respect and reputation. Reputation is a way that gang members can project their image of masculinity to others. Respect was often referenced when their masculine identity was challenged. Finally, we focus on the importance of guns as instruments central to the lives of our gang members in the sense that they help project and protect masculine identities.

## Gang Socialization, Self, and Identity

Goffman (1959) argues that as individuals we are often "taken in by our own act" and therefore begin to feel like the person we are portraying. Baumeister and Tice (1984) describe this process as one where initial behaviors are internalized so that they become part of a person's self-perception. Once initial behaviors are internalized, the individual continues to behave in ways consistent with his or her self-perception. Related to the current study, the socialization process of becoming a gang member required a change in the subject's self-perception. That is, who did our gang members become as compared with who they once were? Social interaction is highly important in the process of socialization because it helps create one's identity and sense of self, as Holstein and Gubrium (2003, 119 [emphasis added]) point out:

> As personal as they seem, our selves and identities are extremely social. They are hallmarks of our inner lives, *yet they take shape in relation to others. We establish who and what we are through social interaction.* In some respects, selves and identities are two sides of the same coin. Selves are the subjects we take ourselves to be; identities are the shared labels we give to these selves. We come to know ourselves in terms of the categories that are socially available to us.

Most inmates we interviewed appeared to indicate that their socialization into the gang began at a relatively young age:

> At about fifteen, I started getting affiliated with the Crips. I knew all these guys, grew up with them and they were there. . . . I mean, it was like an influence at that age. I met this dude named Benzo from Los Angeles at that time. He was a Crip and he showed me a big wad of money. He said, "Hey man, you want some of this?" "Like yeh! Goddamn straight. You know I want some of that." He showed me how to sell crack, and so at fifteen, I went from being scared of the police and respecting them to hustling and selling crack. Now I'm affiliated with the Crips; I mean it was just unbelievable.

Another inmate tells of his orientation in becoming a member of a gang. He points out the glamour he associated with membership at a very impressionable age:

> I started gang banging when I was ten. I got into a gang when I was thirteen. I started just hanging around them, just basically idolizing them. I was basically looking for a role model for my generation and ethnic background; the

main focus for us is the popularity that they got. That's who the kids looked up to. They had status, better clothes, better lifestyle.

One of our black study participants residing with his father in a predominantly white, suburban community felt estranged from the minority friends he had in his former neighborhood. He discussed his need to be among his former peers and voluntarily moved back to his old neighborhood.

A lot of the people that lived where my father was staying were predominantly white. I mean, not to say I didn't get along with white kids but, you know, it was just two different backgrounds and things of that nature.

His racial and socioeconomic identification in the white community, where he resided with his father, offered little opportunity for him to fit in. When he returned to the city, he became involved with a gang quite rapidly.

I started getting charged with assaults. Gang rivalry, you know, fighting, just being in a gang.

Because he was better educated and did not use street vernacular as his peers did, our participant claims he had to continually prove his racial proclivity to his peers.

Other kids would call me "white wash" because I spoke proper English. Basically, I wanted to be somebody, so I started hanging around with gang bangers. I was planning on being the best gang member I can be or the best kind of criminal I can be or something like that.

Consistent with Goffman's (1959) observations, once our subjects became active gang members, their transformation of identity was complete. That is, consistent with the notion of social facilitation and enhancement perspectives (Thornberry et al. 1993), the self-perceptions and identity of the subjects in our study appear to have changed from what they were prior to joining the gang. Shibutani (1961, 523) explains such changes by claiming that

a person's self-perception is caused by a psychological reorientation in which an individual visualizes his world and who he thinks he is in a different light. He retains many of his idiosyncrasies, but develops a new set of values and different criteria of judgment.

Violent behavior appeared to play an important role in this transformation of identity and self. Most gang members noted that they engaged in violent behavior more frequently once they joined the gang.

> At an early age, it was encouraged that I showed my loyalty and do a drive-by . . . anybody they (gangster disciples) deemed to be a rival of the gang. I was going on fourteen. At first, I was scared to and then they sent me out with one person and I seen him do it. I saw him shoot the guy. . . . So, in the middle of a gang fight I get pulled aside and get handed a pistol and he said, "It's your turn to prove yourself." So I turned around and shot and hit one of the guys (rival gang members). After that, it just got more easier. I did more and more. I had no concern for anybody.

A further illustration of situated identity and transformation of self is related by another inmate, who expresses the person he became through the use of violence and gun possession. Retrospectively, he indicates disbelief in what he had become.

> As a gang banger, you have no remorse, so basically, they're natural-born killers. They are killers from the start. When I first shot my gun for the first time at somebody, I felt bad. It was like, I can't believe I did this. But I looked at my friend and he didn't care at all. Most gang bangers can't have a conscience. You can't have remorse. You can't have any values. Otherwise, you are gonna end up retiring as a gang banger at a young age.

The situations one finds themselves in, in this case collective gang violence, together with becoming a person who is willing to use violence to maintain membership in the gang, is indicative of a transformed identity. Strauss (1962) claims that when a person's identity is transformed, they are seen by others as being different than they were before. The individual's prior identity is retrospectively reevaluated in comparison with the present definition of a gang member. Such a transformation was part of the processional change in identity that our prisoners/gang members experienced.

## Commitment to the Gang

"As a creature of ideas, man's main concern is to maintain a tentative hold on these idealized conceptions of himself, to legitimate his role identities" (McCall and Simmons 1966, 71). Commitment to the gang also serves individual needs for its members. We found that gang identification and loyalty to the group was a high priority for our subjects. This loyalty to

the gang was extreme. Our subjects reported that they were willing to risk being killed and were committed to taking the life of a rival gang member if the situation called for such action. That is, gang membership helped our subjects nourish their identity and at the same time provided group maintenance (Kanter 1972). As Kanter (1972) points out, the group is an extension of the individual and the individual is an extension of the group. This notion of sacrifice for the group by proving one's gang identification is expressed by an inmate who perceives his loyalty in the following terms:

> What I might do for my friends [gang peers] you might not do. You've got people out their taking bullets for their friends and killing people. But I'm sure not one of you would be willing to go to that extreme. These are just the thinking patterns we had growing up where I did.

Another inmate tells us about his high degree of identity for his gang:

> If you're not a gang member, you're not on my level . . . most of my life revolves around gangs and gang violence. I don't know anything else but gang violence. I was born into it, so it's my life.

The notion of the gang as the most important primary group in a member's life was consistently expressed by our study subjects. Our subjects often stated that they were willing to kill or be killed for the gang in order to sustain their self-perception as a loyal gang member. This extreme degree of group affiliation is similar to that of armed services activities during wartime. The platoon, or in this case, the local gang, is worth dying for. In this sense, the notion of the gang as a protector was an important part of gang life. All members were expected to be committed enough to aid their peers should the need arise. The following gang member points to the important role his gang played for him in providing physical safety as well as an assurance of understanding.

> That's how it is in the hood, selling dope, gang bangin', everybody wants a piece of you. All the rival gang members, all the cops, everybody. The only ones on your side are the gang members you hang with.

For this particular member, his gang peers are the only people he perceives will aid him from threatening others. The world appears full of conflicting situations, and although his gang affiliation is largely responsible for all the groups that are out to harm him in some way, he nevertheless believes his fellow gang members are the only persons on whom he can depend.

Violence against rival gangs was a general subject that the majority of the inmates interviewed discussed freely. However, only a few of our study participants focused on this subject compared with the less violence-prone gang-affiliated inmates. The violent gang members perceived other gangs as ongoing enemies who constantly presented a threat to their safety. As our literature review suggests, there is some debate about whether gang members would be violent without belonging to a gang, or if formal membership in the group provided them with the opportunity to act out this way. However, we find clarity in the inmate accounts that a gang member's identity provided the context necessary to resort to violence when confronted with conflicting events, as the following inmate notes

> I have hate toward the Crips gang members and have always had hate toward them 'cuz of what they did to my homeboys. . . . I never look back. I do my thing. I always carry a gun no matter what. I am a gang member, man! There are a lot of gang members out to get me for what I done. I shot over forty people at least. That's what I do.

This perception of being a person who is comfortable with violence and the perception of himself as an enforcer type characterizes the above inmate's role within his gang. Turner (1978) suggests that roles consistent with an individual's self-concept are played more frequently and with a higher degree of participation than roles that are not in keeping with that individual's self-concept. Our study subject in this situation fits Turner's explanation of role identity nicely. His hatred for rival gangs and his willingness to retaliate most likely led to his incarceration for attempted murder.

## Masculinity, Reputation, and Respect

For those gang members we interviewed, socialization into the gang and commitment to the gang appear to be central to the notion of masculinity. That is, all gang members we interviewed spoke of the importance of masculinity and how it was projected (though the creation of a reputation) and protected (through demands for respect). The notion of masculinity was constantly invoked in relation to self and identity. In short, masculinity is used to communicate to others what the gang represents, and it is used to send an important signal to others who may wish to challenge a gang's collective identity. A gang member's masculine reputation precedes him or her, so to speak. On an individual level, similar attributes apply as well.

Whatever an individual does and however he appears, he knowingly and unknowingly makes information available concerning the attributes that might be imputed to him and hence the categories in which he might be placed. . . . The physical milieu itself conveys implications concerning the identity of those who are in it (Goffman 1961, 102).

According to Sherif and Wilson (1953), people's ego attitudes define and regulate their behavior toward various other groups and are formed in concert to the values and norms of that person's reference group. They formulate an important part of their self-identity and their sense of group identification. For our gang member study population, the attributes that the gang valued consisted of factors that projected a street image that was necessary to sustain. It was a survival strategy.

*Masculinity.* "Every man [in a gang] is treated as a man until proven different. We see you as a man before anything." This comment by a gang member infers that masculinity is a highly valued attribute in his gang. The idea of manhood and its personal meanings for each interviewed prisoner was a subject consistently repeated by all participants. It usually was brought up in the context of physical violence, often describing situations where one had to face danger as a result of another's threatening behavior or testing of one's willingness to use physical force when insulted by someone outside of the group.

Even if you weren't in one [gang], you got people that are going to push the issue. We decide what we want to do; I ain't no punk, I ain't no busta. But it comes down to pride. It's foolish pride, but a man is going to be a man, and a boy knows he's going to come into his manhood by standing his ground.

Establishing a reputation coincides with becoming a man, entering the realm of violence, being a stand-up guy who is willing to prove his courage as a true gang member. This strong association between a willingness to perpetrate violence on a considered rival, or anyone for that matter, was a theme that defined a member's manhood. After eight years in the gang, the following participant was owed money for selling someone dope. After a few weeks of being put off by the debtor, he had to take some action to appease his gang peers who were pressuring him to retaliate.

I joined the gang when I was eleven years old. So now that I'm in the gang for eight years, people are asking, "What are you going to do? You got to make a name for yourself." So we went over there [victim's residence] and

they were all standing outside and I just shot him. Everybody was happy for me, like "Yea, you shot him, you're cool," and this and that.

A sense of bravado, when displayed, played a utilitarian role in conflicting situations where a gang member attempts to get others to comply with his demands by instilling fear instead of actually utilizing violent means. Having some prior knowledge of the threatening gang member's reputation is helpful in preventing a physical encounter, which is always risky for both parties involved. Again, the importance of firearms in this situation is critical.

The intimidation factor with a gun is amazing. Everybody knows what a gun can do. If you have a certain type of personality, that only increases their fear of you. When it came to certain individuals who I felt were a threat, I would lift my shirt up so they would know I had one on me.

In this case, the showing of his firearm served the purpose of avoiding any altercation that could have led to injury or even worse. Carrying a gun and displaying it proved to be an intimidating, preventative factor for this gang member. The opposite behavior is noted in the following example of extreme bravado, where aggressive behavior is desired and a clear distinction (based on bravery) between drive-by shootings and face-to-face shootings is clear.

If someone is getting shot in a drive-by and someone else gets hit, it is an accident. You know, I never do drive-bys. I walk up to them and shoot. I ain't trying to get anyone else shot to take care of business.

A final example of masculinity and bravado, as perceived by this particular study participant, illustrates his commitment to being a stand-up guy, a person who will face the consequences of gang activity. The situation he discussed had to do with his current incarceration. Here he explains how he adhered to the gang value of not being a snitch, and refused to provide information about rival gang members' involvement in two homicides to the police, which could have helped in his prosecution for murder.

I know what I did [gang war murder], you know what I mean? I'm not gonna take the easy way out [snitch on rival gangs for two homicides]. I know what I did. I'm facing my responsibility.

An interesting note in this scenario has to do with the above inmate's continued loyalty to the values of his gang when he was outside of prison. His

information on the rival gang's homicides most likely could have had the criminal charges against him reduced and subsequently he would have received a lesser prison sentence. We are taking into consideration that the inmate's cultural code is similar if not the same as the gang code, and our study participant was simply adhering to the same value system.

The image of toughness fits well under masculinity and bravado as an attribute positively perceived by gang members we interviewed. Its importance lies in projecting an image via reputation that conveys a definition of who the collective group is and what physical force they are willing to use when necessary. A clear explanation of this attribute is related by the following subject.

> Everybody wants to fight for the power, for the next man to fear him. It's all about actually killing the mother fuckers and how many mother fuckers you can kill. Drive-by shootings is old school.

The implication here is that having a collective reputation for being powerful motivates this prisoner. He notes that the tough image of shooting someone you are after instead of hiding behind the random shooting characterized by drive-bys projects an image of toughness and power.

There are others who prefer to define their toughness in terms of physical fighting without the use of any weapons—though it was often noted that it was too difficult to maintain a tough reputation under such conditions. For instance, the predicament the following gang member found himself in is one where rival gangs use guns and other lethal instruments, and as a result of this, his reputation as an effective street fighter proved to be of little value. In short, his toughness and fighting skills were obsolete in life-threatening encounters.

> Like my case, I'm a fighter. I don't like using guns. The only reason I bought a gun was because every time I got out of the car to fight, I'd have my ribs broken, the back of my head almost crushed with a baseball bat. I was tired of getting jumped. I couldn't get a fair fight. Nobody wanted to fight me because I had a bad reputation. Then I decided, why even fight? Everybody else was pulling guns. It's either get out of the car and get killed or kill them.

The fact that this prisoner had good fighting skills ironically forced him to carry a gun. The rules of gang fighting found him outnumbered and unarmed, placing him in a very vulnerable position to defend himself. The proliferation of firearms among urban street gangs is well documented by Blumstein (1995) and others. Lethal weapons, mainly firearms, have drastically changed

the defining characteristics of gang warfare in the late 1980s and 1990s, when most of our study subjects were active gang members in the community.

*Reputation.* On a collective group level, developing and maintaining the gang's reputation of being a dangerous group to deal with, especially from other groups or individuals who posed a threat to their drug operations, was important. The following inmate points out the necessity of communicating the gang's willingness to use violent retaliation against rivals. Guns often played an important role in the development and maintenance of reputation, though they were rarely utilized in conflicting situations:

> We had guns to fend off jackers, but we never had to use them, 'cause people knew we were straps. People knew our clique, they are not going to be stupid. We've gotten into a few arguments, but it never came to a gun battle. Even when we werne gang bangin', we didn't use guns, we only fought off the Bloods.

Aside from a collective reputation, the group serves the identifying needs of its individual members (Kanter 1972). Our study participants related their need to draw upon the reputation of the gang to help them develop their own reputation, which gave them a sense of fulfillment. People want to present others with cues that will enhance desired typifications of who they are. They desire to present who they are in ways that will cause those they interact with to adhere to their situated claims (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). The following participant discusses the way gang affiliation enhanced his reputation as a dangerous individual, a person not to be tested by others.

> There are people that know me; even ones that are contemplating robbing me know of me from the gang experience. They know if you try and rob me [of drugs and money], more than likely you gonna get killed. I was gonna protect what was mine. I'll die trying.

Another study subject perceives gang membership differently. He attained a reputation through gang activity, and guns clearly played an important role in that process.

> Fear and desire to have a reputation on the streets made me do it. When I got into the streets, I saw the glamour of it. I wanted a reputation there. What better way to get a reputation than to pick up a pistol? I've shot several people.

Although each prisoner/gang member interviewed expressed a desire to be known in the community for some particular attribute, there were some gang members who simply wanted to be known, sort of achieving celebrity status.

> You basically want people to know your name. It's kind of like politicians, like that, you wanna be known. In my generation you want somebody to say, "I know him, he used to hang around with us."

*Respect.* One constantly associates the subject of disrespect in gang vernacular with retaliatory violence. Interactions with rivals stemming from an affront to one's self-image often became the excuse to use a gun to redeem one's reputational identity. Strauss (1969) argues that anger and withdrawal occur when a person is confronted with a possible loss of face. For our subjects, this anger was apparent when rivals challenged their self-identity (i.e., when our subjects were disrespected).

According to the gang members we talked to, disrespect, or rejection of self-professed identity claims by others, often was the cause of violence. Violence is even more likely to be the result of disrespect when no retaliatory action may lead to a loss of face. The following inmate relates his view on this subject in general terms.

> Violence starts to escalate once you start to disrespect me. Once you start to second guess my manhood, I'll fuck you up. You start coming at me with threats, then I feel offended. Once I feel offended, I react violently. That's how I was taught to react.

The interface of their manhood being threatened seems to be directly associated with Strauss's (1962) concept of identity denial by an accusing other. This threat to one's masculinity by not recognizing another's status claims is apparently an extremely serious breach of gang etiquette.

> When someone disrespects me, they are putting my manhood in jeopardy. They are saying my words are shit, or putting my family in danger. . . . Most of the time, I do it [use violence] to make people feel the pain or hurt that I feel. I don't know no other way to do it, as far as expressing myself any other way.

Hickman and Kuhn (1956) point out that the self anchors people in every situation they are involved in. Unlike other objects, they claim that the self is present in all interactions and serves as the basis from which we all make judgments and plans of reaction toward others that are part of a given situation.

When being confronted by gang rivals who have been perceived as insulting an opposing gang member, the definition of street norms calls for an exaggerated response. That is, the disrespectful words must be countered with serious physical force to justify the disrespected individual's maintenance of self (or manhood). A prime example of feeling disrespected is discussed in terms of territory and the unwritten rules of the street by one gang member who told us of an encounter with a rival gang who disrespected him to the point that he felt he was left with no other alternative choice of action but to shoot them.

> So, as we were fighting, they started saying that this was their neighborhood and started throwing their gang signs. To me, to let somebody do that to me is disrespect. So I told them where I was from.

A little while later the gang members in question showed up in our study subject's neighborhood and shot at him as he was walking with his two small children to a convenience store to get ice cream. He continues to recite the tale:

> I was just so mad and angry for somebody to disrespect me like that and shoot. We got a rule on the street. There is rules. You don't shoot at anybody if there is kids. That's one of the main rules of the street. They broke the rules. To me that was telling me that they didn't have no respect for me or my kids. So, that's how I lost it and shot them. I was so disrespected that I didn't know how to handle it.

The notion of disrespect is analogous to an attack on the self. Because many of the inmates in our sample reported that masculinity is an important attribute of the self, they believed any disrespect was a direct threat to their masculinity. For those brought up in impoverished high-crime communities, as these study population participants were, there are limited alternatives to such conflicting situations (Anderson 1999). Retaliation to redeem one's self-identity in terms of his internalized concept of manhood precludes a violent reaction to all actions of insult. To gang members caught in those confrontational encounters, there is a very limited course of action, that of perpetrating violence toward those who would threaten their self-concept of who they believe they are.

## Gangs and Guns

The perceived necessity by gang participants to carry handguns became a reality for our study group. They collectively expressed the danger of their life on the street, whether it was selling narcotics, committing a robbery,

being a provocateur against rivals, or being the recipient of violent retaliation on the part of perceived enemies. They viewed their world fraught with potential danger, thus the need for the possession of guns. It is necessary, then, to take the person's definition of the situation into account in explaining their unlawful conduct (Hewitt 1988). Often, the interviewed prisoners emphasized the importance of the gun as an attribute that communicated their masculinity in some situations but was protection in others. Quite often, both definitions of the situation existed simultaneously.

Our analysis of the interview data dichotomized those gun-using encounters as expressions of either power or protection, based on each participant's perceived definition of the situation.

Carrying a firearm elicits various feelings of power.

> When I have a gun, I feel like I'm on top of it, like I'm Superman or something. You got to let them know.

Another participant explains that the larger the gun, the more powerful he felt:

> I was fifteen at that point in time and I had a fascination with guns. It was like the more powerful impact the gun had, the more fascinated I got and the more I wanted it.

The actual use of a firearm is described in a situation that most lethally expressed the power of guns in an attempt to injure those belonging to rival gangs. In this situation, our subject points out that they were not trying to injure or kill anyone for personal reasons but rather to display a sense of willingness to commit a lethal act for purposes of dominance.

> When I was younger, we used to do drive-bys. It didn't matter who you were. We didn't go after a specific person. We went after a specific group. Whoever is standing at a particular house or wherever you may be, and you're grouped up and have the wrong color on; just because you were in a rival gang. You didn't have to do anything to us to come get you, it was a spontaneous reaction.

When not being involved in collective gang violence, individual members find themselves being involved in gun-use situations as instigators when confronting rivals on one's own.

> My cousin told me if you pull it you better use it. So you gotta boost yourself. When the time came I was just shooting.

Our findings showed that in the vast majority of gang member–related shootings, most of these violent gun-using situations involved individuals as opposed to large numbers of gangs confronting each other with firearms. Yet, we were told that in gang representation, either on an individual basis or in a small group, whether it be in a protective or retaliatory mode, gang members needed to display a power position to those confronting them to maintain their reputations, and guns were important in that respect.

The issues surrounding gun possession often have to do with interpersonal conflict as opposed to collective gang situations. The fear of being physically harmed within their residential environment, coupled with the relative ease in which a person can attain a firearm, has resulted in a proliferation of weapons in the community. Growing up in such high-crime neighborhoods and then joining a gang can shape a minority teen's perceptions of his or her social world.

> There's a lot of brutality, there is a lot of murder around us. There is a lot of violence, period. There are enemies and all. A lot of pressure, you know. If you're not going to do this, then they're going to do it to you. I'd rather get caught with a gun than without.

The perceived fear for potential harm caused this female gang member to carry a gun with her outside her home. When she expresses the violence that is prevalent in her environment, she is also telling us how random threats can often occur and sees the necessity to harm rivals before they harm her.

Individually or collectively, rival gang members constantly pose a physical threat according to the next inmate. He also discusses the need for protection and how drug sales caused him to be a target for those who would try and rob him.

> I carried a gun because I knew what I was doing, especially since I was in a gang. Other gangs are gonna try and come after us. So I used it [gun] against those gangs and to make sure that my investments in the drugs was protected. I don't want nobody to take money from me.

Last, one study subject relates the need to carry a gun all the time to protect his jewelry, which he openly displays as a symbol of his monetary success through the use of illegal means.

> I basically carried a gun for protection. Just like you have a best friend. You and your best friend go everywhere. I got over ten thousand dollars of jewelry

on me. People see all this jewelry and may try and beat me up. There may be two or three and just myself.

For our prisoner/gang member study population, the descriptive attributes they related all played an important role in shaping their individual gang identity. The roles they learned to play through their processional development into bona fide gang participants were accomplished by group socialization. Their acting upon those perceived valued attributes resulted in their transformed identity. Once the socializing process is complete, the novice gang member has to sustain his reputation and status personally as well as collectively with the formal group.

> An individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. (Goffman 1959, 1-5)

For Goffman, the claims (attributes) our sample of gang members desired to convey to others of just who they perceived themselves to be directly affected their sense of self.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Gangs not only fulfill specific needs for individuals that other groups in disadvantaged neighborhoods may fail to provide, but as our interviews suggest, they are also important primary groups into which individuals become socialized. It is not surprising, then, that self-concept and identity are closely tied to gang membership. Guns are also important in this regard. We propose that for the gang members in our sample, gang-related gun violence can be understood in terms of self and identity that are created through the process of socialization and are heavily rooted in notions of masculinity. Thus, our analysis provides insight into the way gang socialization can produce violence—especially gun-related violence.

We find that related to the issue of gun violence, the possession and use of guns among gang members is relatively important because, in addition to protecting gang members, guns are tools that aid in identity formation and impression management. As many of our subject narratives suggest, guns

were often connected in some way to masculine attributes. Gang members reported to us that they could often use guns to project their reputation or reclaim respect. We believe that the consequences of our findings regarding gang violence and guns are important for public policy for three reasons.

First, because our sample only consisted of those gang members who committed the most severe forms of violence (i.e., they were incarcerated for relatively long periods of time for their gun-related violence), there may be some interest in targeting individuals like the ones in our sample early in their criminal careers to "diminish the pool of chronic gang offenders" (Piehl, Kennedy, and Braga 2000, 100). We believe this may be one potential method for reducing gang-related violence because the gang members in our sample often had extensive violent histories. Moreover, in studies of gang violence, researchers have generally found that a small number of offenders commit most of the crime. For instance, Kennedy, Piehl and Braga (1996) found that less than one percent of Boston's youth were responsible for nearly sixty percent of the city's homicides. Thus, identifying the rather small pool of chronic gang members may be a useful approach to reducing gang violence because they are the ones engaged in most of the violence. This approach, however, is somewhat problematic because identifying chronic offenders is both difficult and controversial (Walker 1998). Moreover, Spergel and Curry (1990), who studied the effectiveness of various gang-related intervention strategies, argue that law enforcement efforts seem to be one of the least effective methods for reducing gang-related problems.

Second, our research suggests that policies aimed at reducing gang violence should take gang socialization into account. Simply reducing gun availability through law enforcement crackdowns on violent gang members is probably not sufficient (see Piehl, Kennedy, Braga 2000). In addition, our interviews suggest that guns are probably far more important to the daily lives and identities of gang members than most policy makers might imagine, precisely because they help project a reputation and create respect. Thus, it might be pointed out that if gang culture could be changed through the resocialization of gang members, gun-related gang violence might significantly decrease. Indeed, studies of gun initiatives such as the Boston Gun Project suggest that gang violence is reduced when gang culture is changed. As Piehl, Kennedy, and Braga (2000, 100) point out, one reason homicides in Boston decreased as a result of the Boston Gun Project was because that initiative focused on "establishing and/or reinforcing nonviolent norms by increasing peer support for eschewing

violence, by improving young people's handling of potentially violent situations."

Overall, however, the strategy of focusing on gang socialization, however, falls most closely in line with social intervention perspectives that have not proved to be highly successful in various situations (Shelden, Tracy, and Brown 2001). In short, altering the values of gang members to make gang-related violence less likely may not be the most promising approach to reducing gang violence. As Klein (1995, 147) recently noted, "Gangs are by-products of their communities: They cannot long be controlled by attacks on symptoms alone; the community structure and capacity must also be targeted." Whether gang violence can be reduced by the resocialization of gang members appears to remain open to debate, but it is clearly one avenue of intervention that requires further attention in the research.

Third, it is not clear from our research whether simply eliminating or reducing access to guns can reduce gun-related gang violence. For example, studies like the Youth Firearms Violence Initiative conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services does suggest that gun violence can be reduced by focusing, at least in part, on reducing access to guns (Dunworth 2000). However, that study also indicates that once these projects focusing on access to guns end, gang violence increases to previous levels. Moreover, our interviews suggest that there is little reason to believe that gang members would be any less likely to look to gangs as a source of status and protection and may use other weapons—though arguably less lethal than guns—to aid in transformations of identity and preserve a sense of self. Thus, although reduction strategies may prevent gang-related violence in the short-term, there is little evidence that this intervention strategy will have long-term effects because it does not adequately deal with gang culture and processes of gang socialization.

Overall, our findings suggest that gang socialization produces gang-related gun violence through changes to identity and self. Although the problems of gang-related violence appear to play out at the microlevel, the solutions to these problems do not appear to be overwhelmingly situated at this level. Instead, we believe that intervention efforts must reside at the macrolevel and impact socialization processes at the microlevel. We agree with Short (1997, 181) that "absent change in macro level forces associated with [gang violence], vulnerable individuals will continue to be produced" (see also Shelden, Tracy, and Brown 2001). Thus, it may be more fruitful to focus on intervention efforts aimed at improving the economic and social environments that create gangs.

# Appendix
# Characteristics of Inmates in Sample

| ID | Age | Sex | Race/ Ethnicity | Education (Years) | Offense | Sentence (Years) | Years Served | No. Previous Felonies |
|----|-----|-----|-----------------|-------------------|---------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| 1 | 28 | M | Hispanic | 11 | Attempted first degree murder | 16 | 7 | 0 |
| 2 | 21 | M | Black | 7 | Second degree kidnapping | 16 | 3 | 1 |
| 3 | 20 | M | Black | 11 | Attempted first degree murder | 21 | 3 | 3 |
| 4 | 21 | M | Hispanic | 11 | Second degree assault | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 5 | 21 | M | Black | 12 | First degree murder | Life | 2 | 2 |
| 6 | 48 | M | White | 12 | Second degree assault | 14 | 6 | 7 |
| 7 | 33 | M | Black | 12 | Attempted first degree murder | 16 | 9 | 2 |
| 8 | 22 | M | Black | 9 | Second degree assault | 25 | 5 | 4 |
| 9 | 38 | M | Black | 12 | Manslaughter | 22 | 9 | 1 |
| 10 | 28 | M | White | 12 | Second degree murder | 30 | 8 | 2 |
| 11 | 25 | M | Black | 11 | First degree murder | Life | 4 | 2 |
| 12 | 23 | M | Black | 12 | First degree assault | 14 | 2 | 3 |
| 13 | 24 | M | White | 10 | Aggravated robbery | 20 | 5 | 2 |
| 14 | 32 | M | Black | 12 | First degree murder | 40 | 16 | 0 |
| 15 | 29 | M | Hispanic | 12 | Second degree assault | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| 16 | 25 | M | Black | 12 | First degree assault | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| 17 | 32 | M | Black | 10 | Attempted first degree murder | 20 | 3 | 2 |
| 18 | 20 | M | Asian | 9 | Second degree kidnapping | 40 | 3 | 0 |
| 19 | 26 | F | Black | 11 | Aggravated robbery | 8 | 4 | 0 |
| 20 | 43 | M | White | 12 | First degree assault | 9 | 0 | 2 |
| 21 | 33 | M | Black | 12 | Second degree murder | 35 | 5 | 0 |
| 22 | 23 | M | White | 11 | First degree assault | 45 | 5 | 1 |

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