



'Chillin', Being Dogged and Getting Buzzed': alcohol in the lives of female gang members

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores drinking by girl gang members. Sociologists and criminologists have tended to concentrate on both male gang members and their involvement in drug dealing. This pre-occupation has tended to overshadow not only the role of female gang members but also the importance of drinking within youth gangs. In spite of a growing interest in female drinking, ethnographic and qualitative research on female drinking is still much less developed than that devoted to male drinking. In analyzing the culture of drinking in the lives of girl gang members, we uncover the extent to which alcohol plays a central part in their everyday lives. Data for this paper are drawn from the results of an on-going study of street gangs in the San Francisco Bay area, in which 97 female gang members were interviewed using both a quantitative and qualitative interview schedule.*

Introduction

During the 1980s, as a result of the prolonged and highly politicized 'War on Drugs', a number of groups deemed responsible for the growing problems with drugs became targeted, in particular, youth gangs. As the gang issue became an *issue* in its own right, much of the public's concern focused not only on issues of violence, but also on the perceived increasing involvement of young women in gang life. While some researchers suggested that girl gang membership was increasing, others tended to be more cautious, believing that participation has remained relatively consistent over time (Esbensen *et al.*, 1993; Fagan, 1990; Winfree *et al.*, 1992) [1].

Regardless of the exact percentage of female membership, there is little doubt that in recent years female gang participation has generated much public concern and media attention, in part because they are becoming more visible, and also because they are presumed to be rebelling against traditional notions of femininity. Women's magazines, television talk shows, and popular non-fiction books have promoted and celebrated a particular 'bad girl' image of girl gang members. These 'bad girls' are typically characterized as becoming more like their male

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counterparts: wild, hedonistic, irrational, amoral and violent (see Chesney-Lind, 1993). Although participation in gangs and violence has been traditionally perceived as an understandable if not 'normal' response among disenfranchised young men, the same cannot be said of girls' involvement in gangs. Until recently, the role of females in street gangs has been either downplayed or neglected. Male gang researchers traditionally characterized female members as maladjusted tomboys or sexual deviants, who in either case were no more than mere appendages of male gangs (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995).

A small but growing number of qualitative studies, however, demonstrate that these two polar views of female gang members, as either dependent sexual appendages or independent masculine girls, fail to take account of the context and experiences of these young women. Following this trend, our own research has begun both to concentrate more specifically on female gang members, and shift the previous pre-occupation of gang studies on drug use and drug sales to the often over-looked territory of the role of alcohol. From our previous research on gangs, we became increasingly aware of the extent to which drinking was both integral and endemic to gang life. Although some gang researchers have noted the importance of drinking in the social life of gangs (Fagan, 1993; Feldmann *et al.*, 1985; Moore *et al.*, 1978; Short & Strodbeck, 1965), few have looked specifically at the role of alcohol. Existing research on the role of alcohol has been, to paraphrase Dwight Heath (1975), a 'felicitous by-product' of other interests. And yet, as Fagan (1993) has noted, alcohol is still the most widely used substance both by gang and non-gang youth.

In spite of societal concerns about women drinking, which as Fillmore (1984) has noted may have less to do with worries about the pharmacologic impact of alcohol and more to do with political and symbolic concerns about the position of women within society, social scientists have tended to view drinking culture as male culture. Consequently, much of the literature on drinking, especially public drinking, has focused on male drinking: 'alcohol studies...have examined alcohol predominantly from a male point of view, seemingly regarding alcohol as a substance that naturally belongs to men...Very few studies...examine alcohol consumption...from a women's point of view' (Gefou-Madianou, 1992, p. 8; see also Heath, 1993). This has led to a situation where today, although the number of detailed accounts of female drinking has increased [2], ethnographic and qualitative research on female drinking is still much less developed than that devoted to male drinking. While research has shown that male drinking confirms notions of real masculine identity, 'real men drink' (Driessen, 1983; Ettore, 1997; Ettore & Riska, 1995; Mars, 1987; Peace, 1992), much less work has been conducted on the relationships between female drinking, social context and female identity. The only exception to this has been the studies of societal images of women who overdrink (Ettore, 1997; Fillmore, 1984; Sandmair, 1980).

Moreover as researchers have noted, women find themselves judged by a 'double standard' whereby women are expected not only to drink less but also to refrain from becoming drunk and out of control in public. Historically, women's access to the public realm has been curtailed, and they have found themselves located or primarily defined within the private or domestic arena. This association of women with the domestic realm has influenced alcohol research, which has concentrated on drinking in public thereby further marginalizing the issue of women and alcohol (Gefou-Madianou, 1992). Although today the position of women has significantly altered, for many young working-class and minority

women the public arena, and especially that of the street, is still largely uncharted territory controlled by young men. Given these images of women's drinking, and their confinement to the domestic realm, an examination of drinking by female gang members may prove instructive.

As we noted above, the current image of the gang girl is either that of a wild, hedonistic, amoral and violent individual who flaunts traditional notions of femininity, or that of a sexual chattel. If it is indeed the case that these young women have decided not to conform to societal expectations of being feminine and have begun to construct their own notions of feminine behavior, whether in private or in public, then a series of interesting questions concerning their alcohol use arise. For example, to what extent do these young women develop a way of drinking which, rather than reflecting male drinking behaviors, develops out of, and is in line with their role as female gang members? Does getting drunk increase female solidarity as girl gang members in the same way that men getting drunk increases male camaraderie (Peace, 1992), or does it create conflict, tension, and disapproval? Is it the case that girl gang members find themselves, regardless of their desire to carve out a new identity for themselves within the patriarchal structure of the gang and the street, still controlled by quasi-traditional gender drinking roles? If this is true, are these normative rules and expectations enforced solely by the men in the gang or are they also implemented by other girl gang members? In other words, do these young women, while insisting on their right as girl gang members to consume alcohol freely, find themselves not merely being controlled by the men in the group but more significantly by their fellow girl gang members? This latter question is particularly important for a study of women and alcohol and one that this article will hopefully illuminate. Although much has been written on the way in which the society and men have controlled women's access to alcohol and the way that women in turn attempt to control male drinking (Gusfield, 1963; Levine, 1980), much less has been written on the way in which women in social groups control other women.

In order to begin to examine some of these issues, this paper considers the role of female drinking within the life of the gang, detailing not only the extent to which drinking is a commonplace and everyday activity of gang life, but also examining their relationships with homeboys, other girl gang members, as well as their early experiences of drinking in the family.

Research Methods

The data for this analysis are drawn from our ongoing qualitative study of ethnic gangs in the San Francisco Bay Area, and entails observational fieldwork and depth interviews. The interviews are based on a snowball sampling strategy, a method we have used successfully in our past gang studies (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This sampling strategy relied on respondents referring members of their group or other groups to be interviewed. The respondents in this particular sample of 97 female gang members were part of a study of gangs in San Francisco in which interviews with more than 500 gang members from various ethnic groups in the San Francisco Bay area were obtained over the course of the past 2½ years. The women were interviewed between June 1997 and April 1999. The total number of young women involved in gangs in the San Francisco Bay area is unknown, and our sample is exploratory, however a new project is currently

focusing on female gang members in an effort to more accurately map and explore the total number of young women involved in gangs in San Francisco.

The in-depth interview involved a two-step process in which the interviewee first answered a series of questions from a quantitative schedule. The second step entailed a tape-recorded session, and members reflected on questions from a semi-structured guide about their gang experiences. This combined approach of qualitative and social survey methodology provided an opportunity to focus on the groups' histories, organization and activities, personal demographics, alcohol and drug use, individual history and involvement with the group, and prior contact with the criminal justice system. We also asked the young women about power relations and gender expectations within the group, with the various males in their lives and with their families.

Six interviewers, two males and four females, were involved in conducting the female interviews. Four of these also worked on the male component of the project. Two interviewers focused on each of three ethnic groups, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians, and attempts were made to match our interviewers to communities where their experiences or ethnicity would aid their targeting efforts. Each interviewer had some experience in working with 'hard to reach' populations, and these experiences included volunteer and/or paid youth and community work, residence in communities known for gang activities, former associations with gangs themselves or family members with associations, or other knowledge of the gang scene or the streets. Given these background characteristics and knowledge, the interviewers seldom had difficulties in establishing rapport and trust with the girls. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings ranging from the respondent's or peer's residence, parks, church youth centers and coffee shops. Interviews were conducted mainly in English, although respondents did occasionally answer questions in Spanish. In such cases, the interviewer translated the responses. Interviews lasted from 90 minutes to 3 hours. We gave a \$65 honorarium in recognition of their participation and time.

We took several steps to address validity and reliability issues. Given the field workers' familiarity with the scene and with some of the respondents, the respondents were less likely to exaggerate or minimize their experiences. During the course of the interview, the field workers rephrased questions at different times to detect inconsistencies and to ensure truthfulness. As in all our gang interviews, the interviewer is required to make judgements about the veracity of responses by individual gang members. This involves the interviewer assessing both general truthfulness of the respondent and the extent to which inconsistencies existed. Part of this assessment is intuitive, part comes from the interviewers' own knowledge and understanding of the community and of the gangs, which inevitably increases over time as the interviewer gains a larger overall knowledge base of the gang scene. In addition, multiple members of the same gang are often interviewed and consistent stories further validate the data that interviewers are given. Finally, the interviewer also conducts periodic field observations to further cross-check respondents' veracity.

We also rely on coders [3] who are not involved in the interviews themselves to listen to the tape recordings and gauge the reliability of the quantitative portion of the interviews. They do this by listening for inconsistencies in certain generally problematic areas, for inconsistencies specific to the habits of a certain interviewer and contradictions that occur within the responses of an interviewee. Some of

these are caught by the interviewer, but in the course of a 2–3-hour interview, these contradictions may be undetected. Some of the more problematic areas include understanding and remembering information across a number of time frames and specifying numbers of times drinking occurred or amounts consumed, particularly when large numbers are involved. While our interviewers were trained to assist the respondent in answering questions of this nature, there were cases when the coders discovered that the respondent had clearly not understood the question.

The Girls in the Hood

The female respondents in this sample come from 53 different gangs in and around San Francisco. The fact that 97 women are members of 53 different gangs may come as a surprise to some, but, based on our previous research and mapping of the city, gangs and gang activity is growing among youth in San Francisco. Clearly there are more gangs and clearly there are more youth involved in gangs. Table 1 presents some of the characteristics of the women in the sample. The majority of the respondents were Latina and the remaining 36% were split between various ethnic groups including African Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Whites, and several women of mixed descent. The ages of the women ranged from 14 to 29 with a mean age of 18.9. More than half were 19 years of age or older. For the purposes of some of the analysis the girls are divided into three age groups, 13 respondents are 15 years and younger, 32 are between 16 and 18 years of age, and 52 are 19 and older.

Their family backgrounds and domestic units were varied. More than two-thirds of them grew up primarily in households where their mother was present and of these, in 40 of the cases, their father was not present. Several of the women had been in foster homes or other institutional types of settings, and a few grew up primarily with their grandparents, with adult siblings, or other combinations of family members, like aunts. Four-fifths of the sample were single and almost one-third of the respondents were mothers themselves.

Nearly 25% of the women had graduated from high school and more than 40% were still in school. Almost one-third of the women worked, two-thirds of these in service type jobs, like receptionists and waitresses (see Table 2). Almost half of the sample relied on a combination of income sources including their families, hustling and jobs, to support themselves.

Almost two-thirds of the women (62) were Latina, representing 29 different gangs. Nine of these women were immigrants: eight from Mexico and one born in Guatemala, with the remaining 53 having been born in the USA. The majority of these still had strong connections with Mexico, their families having emigrated one or two generations previously.

The 16 African American women were members of 11 different gangs. The youngest African American respondent was 14 and the oldest was 28. The majority of the women lived in areas in San Francisco with a high concentration of low-income housing projects with primarily African American residents including Bayview, Hunter's Point, and Sunnydale.

The seven Asian women had ethnic roots in various Asian countries including Korea, Vietnam, mainland China and Hong Kong. They ranged in age from 18 to 29, with the 29-year-old being the oldest respondent in the sample. Two lived in the East Bay, but their gangs hung out in San Francisco in areas in the city with a

Table 1. Demographic information

	African American (<i>n</i> = 16) 20 years		Latina (<i>n</i> = 62) 18 years		Asian (<i>n</i> = 7) 19 years		Pacific Islander (<i>n</i> = 5) 15 years		White (<i>n</i> = 2) 19 years		Mixed (<i>n</i> = 5) 17 years		Total (<i>n</i> = 97) 19 years	
Education														
9th grade or less	7	43.8%	26	41.9%	3	42.9%	3	60.0%	1	50.0%	3	60.0%	43	44.3%
10th grade	2	12.5%	7	11.3%	2	28.6%	0	0.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	12	12.4%
11th grade	2	12.5%	14	22.6%	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	18	18.6%
12th grade	4	25.0%	15	24.2%	2	28.6%	1	20.0%	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	23	23.7%
Other: GED	1	6.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
Marital status														
Single	14	87.5%	48	77.4%	6	85.7%	4	80.0%	1	50.0%	5	100.0%	78	80.4%
Live-in partner	1	6.3%	7	11.3%	1	14.3%	1	20.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	11	11.3%
Married	1	6.3%	6	9.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	7	7.2%
Separated	0	0.0%	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
Number of children														
None	7	43.8%	42	67.7%	7	100.0%	5	100.0%	1	50.0%	4	80.0%	66	68.0%
One	3	18.8%	14	22.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	18	18.6%
Two	2	12.5%	4	6.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	7	7.2%
Three	2	12.5%	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	3.1%
Four	2	12.5%	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	3.1%

Table 2. Employment and income resources

	African American (n = 16) 20 years		Latina (n = 62) 18 years		Asian (n = 7) 19 years		Pacific Islander (n = 5) 15 years		White (n = 2) 19 years		Mixed (n = 5) 17 years		Total (n = 97) 19 years	
Age (median)	0	0.0%	24	38.7%	3	42.9%	2	40.0%	1	50.0%	1	20.0%	31	31.9%
Employment	0	0.0%	24	38.7%	3	42.9%	2	40.0%	1	50.0%	1	20.0%	31	31.9%
Work type														
Service	0	0.0%	14	58.3%	2	66.7%	2	100.0%	1	100.0%	1	100.0%	20	20.6%
Semi-skilled	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	33.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
Unskilled	0	0.0%	6	25.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	6	6.2%
Childcare	0	0.0%	3	12.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	3.1%
Other	0	0.0%	1	4.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
Income source														
Welfare	1	6.3%	8	12.9%	1	14.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	10	10.3%
Job	0	0.0%	10	16.1%	2	28.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	12	12.4%
Family	0	0.0%	16	25.8%	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	0	0.0%	1	20.0%	18	18.6%
Hustle	7	43.8%	4	6.5%	1	14.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	12	12.4%
Friends	0	0.0%	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
Combination	8	50.0%	22	35.5%	3	42.9%	4	80.0%	2	100.0%	4	80.0%	43	44.8%

high Asian population including Chinatown, the Tenderloin, and the Sunset district. The five Pacific Islanders, who were Samoan or Filipino, were all from different gangs and lived in different neighborhoods around the city. They ranged between 15 and 21 years of age, and were the youngest of the groups represented.

On the whole, the women in our sample represent a group with a fairly low level of education and with few income-producing resources, and are similar to those reported in other research efforts (Campbell, 1984; Harris, 1988; Fishman, 1988; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Moore & Hagedorn, 1996). Most of them live in lower income areas and/or ethnic enclaves where opportunities are limited, but opportunities to join gangs are abundant. They were generally older teenagers, many of whom had begun to have children themselves, with a range of different types of relationships with their families and other key people in their lives.

Alcohol and Gang Life

Most of the young women had their first taste of alcohol, figuratively and literally, in their own homes. They became acquainted with alcohol prior to their own use through the drinking of family members, many of them witnessed excessive drinking in their homes or in the company of extended family members. Approximately 50% of the respondents reported that one or more of their family members, usually a parent, were heavy drinkers. Although some of the families and family members were conservative drinkers or abstainers, even in these families, the respondents could generally pinpoint some family member who had histories or problems with alcohol. Clearly the women had a range of encounters with alcohol in their young lives whether as witnesses, bystanders, participants, or, on occasion, victims. These early encounters could be decisive in deciding their future relationships with alcohol. For a few respondents, who experienced a disturbing event while drinking, alcohol consumption may become a taboo activity. However, for the vast majority of the young women, and in spite of witnessing and experiencing negative effects, drinking remained an important part of their lives:

‘I seen the way my mom and dad were drinking, and like I started to desire that, like even though I seen all the violence in it, even though I seen all the crying and the hurting, I just thought that’s just the way it was, and I started to want that. It influenced me ‘cause I seen only the good time in it. Even though I knew there was a bad side of it, I seen the fun of it, the excitement of it, you know, and the drinking and stuff, and feeling good, you know? And so that’s why I started drinking.’ (F043)

For the majority of the respondents the lure of alcohol—the fun, excitement, and a sense of feeling good—far outweighed its potentially negative consequences, so much so that drinking was an integral part of their lives as members of the gang.

Drinking and the Individual

The regularity and extent of their drinking can be seen from the following analysis of the respondents’ drinking. Almost three-quarters of them began regular drinking as early as age 15 or younger (see Table 3). Only 13 women

Table 3. Age of regular drinking ($n = 97$)

Drinking age (more than once per month)	No. of responses	%
Never	13	13.4
15 or younger	71	73.2
16–18	11	11.3
19 or older	2	2.1

Table 4. Beverage of choice ($n = 95$)

Alcohol used most often	No. of responses	%
None	14	14.8
Beer	31	32.6
Wine	8	8.4
Hard liquor	42	44.2

out of the sample never started any type of regular drinking activity, in other words drinking any type of alcohol more than once a month. Of those respondents who did not drink regularly, many either recounted unpleasant early drinking experiences, or said that they did not like the taste. Thirty-one of the respondents had not drunk alcohol at all in the last month, and 13 had completely abstained from drinking in the last year.

Of those who did drink, hard liquor was the beverage chosen by most of the respondents (see Table 4). Hennessey brandy was a favorite among the African American women, Presidente brandy was the brand chosen by Latinas. Almost a third of the respondents, the majority of them Latinas, were beer drinkers, and often the gang girls got together with each other and/or with their homeboys [4] on the streets or at the park to share some '40s', 40 ounce bottles of beer, usually malt liquor. (Establishing exact drinking amounts can be very difficult among youth on the streets because of their general habit of pooling their money and buying bottles to share.)

In their accounts of experiences when they had become the most drunk in the last year, those girls, age 15 and younger, drank significantly less alcohol to get drunk, most between three and seven drinks. However in the two older age groups, the majority of the women drank more than 15 drinks when they got drunk. During these incidents, they most frequently drank hard liquor or a combination of alcohol, usually liquor and beer. More than a third were at their own home or at a friend's when they got drunk, and two-thirds were either in the company of friends or gang members.

Although the girl gang members were not specifically asked about the effects of alcohol, most young women we interviewed were well aware of its effects, recognizing that both their own and others' behavior could change significantly. For example, Susan, who had come to normalize drinking and violence as part of Korean culture, found herself becoming not only a very heavy drinker in her early teens, but also acutely aware of the transformations that took place when drinking:

'Well, its like for me, personally when I drink, I get either very depressed or usually I get violent. And then just start talking shit, and it just kinda blows up from there... It intensifies whatever mood I'm in. If I'm hella

sad, I drink up. Then you know, I be like talkin about my sadness—whatever. And if I'm hella hyped up and a jug I drink, I'll get hyper. If I'm angry, I get violent.' (HG018)

In addition to realizing both the pleasures of drinking and the fact that alcohol could alter their behavior, the respondents reported using alcohol for a number of reasons including the following:

Increasing a sense of prowess. Given the extent to which violent events, like drinking, also appear to be endemic to their lives, we were particularly curious to discover how our respondents viewed the relationship between alcohol and fighting. Some respondents said that they preferred not to drink before a fight because it slows their reflexes, impeding their ability to fight, but most did not have such hesitation, some claiming that it stimulated them and improved their competitive abilities:

'Usually I drink before I fight because it pumps me up. Like I said, I am not the type of person, I am not a violent person. But if you mess with me then you know what I am saying, all hell is going to break loose. So I usually drink, say just to get my blood warm. Just to get me pumped.' (HG027)

Improving self-esteem. Some of the respondents noted the way that alcohol improved their sense of themselves. For example, by giving them more confidence as in the following quote:

'Well for me, I did it to fit in ... And, then, after a while, I guess it's just kind of a way to relax—to forget about things. You know, just get a cool buzz on—act crazy. Cuz, you know, like when you drink, you get kinda...you get more confidence. You're not that fearful of stuff.' (HG018)

Alcohol also helped to alter their feelings about themselves:

'Alcohol boosts your mentality. Like right now I can be fat but if I go to the store and get a tall can, I would forget all about being fat. It just takes away how you are feeling for the moment.' (HG027)

Finally, in addition to the positive effects of alcohol, some respondents noted the way in which alcohol operated as a two-edged sword. Although drinking initially led to positive developments, such as being more open, this could, in turn, potentially lead to conflict:

'You argue more cuz you get more personal when you drink. And when you're not drinking, you could just hide it and put it aside. But when you drink you put everything out and say it and start arguing.' (HG015)

Drinking in the Gang: cohesion and division

Much of the anthropological literature has highlighted the way in which alcohol can operate in two diametrically opposing ways within social groups. On the one hand, alcohol can be fundamentally important in producing and maintaining cohesion and social solidarity (Brandes, 1979; Mars, 1987). On the other hand, and

at the same time, it can create social demarcation and division (Hunt & Satterlee, 1986). Drinking may produce the circumstances by which pre-existing tensions between group members become exacerbated. In social groups, such as gangs, where violent behavior is a common and endemic practice, or as Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) called it 'the currency of life', drinking may operate in an opposite way by fueling and provoking divisions.

Social cohesion. Hanging around: The most obvious form of cohesive activity associated with drinking within the gang is that of 'hanging around' (Corrigan, 1976) or 'kickin' back,' and gang members spent the majority of each day pursuing this activity. Although adults perceive these activities as a waste of time, the everyday practice of 'doing nothing' is often an intense and busy period of time (Corrigan, 1976). Activities that occur while members are 'kickin' back' include talking, recounting details from previous events, joking, discussing business, defending one's honor, maintaining one's respect, fending off insults, keeping the police at bay, 'cruising' around in a car, doing a few deals, defending turf, smoking 'dope' and drinking. Drinking is endemic to gang life, and as many gang members indicate, the consumption of alcohol occurs continually throughout the course of everyday social activities. As with many other social groups, drinking can be said to act as a social 'lubricant', or social 'glue' working to maintain cohesion and group solidarity (Moore *et al.*, 1978; Vigil, 1988; Vigil & Long, 1990).

Although being on the streets is a natural and legitimized social arena for boys, governed by rules of masculinity (Campbell, 1986; Kennedy & Baron, 1993), girls on the street are less typical. Nevertheless, it is clear from our research that female gang members, like their male counterparts, spend a good deal of time, hanging out, chillin', kickin' back and drinking:

'We used to go to parks and just go there kick back and drink. We used to do that all the time. Lots of times we would go to our barrios and kick back you know. Sometimes just go to a friend's house and drink over there and kick back and...with my homegirl [a girl gang member] or something and we'd drink and kick back till like 3:00...and then we'll all kick back and drink and party and stuff like that. Go home at like 8:00 or 7:00 and then the next day.' (F038)

In the same way that drinking was endemic in the everyday lives of men, so too was it for the women. A point neatly illustrated in this young woman's account of a 'normal day':

'When I first get up the first thing that I do is I don't brush my teeth, I don't eat, I don't do nothing. I go smoke me a nice little joint. It is about 9:00 or 10:00. The corner store is open. Liquor, go get me a nice little beer. It is 10:00 by then if I am not with my clique we are on our way to meet up. We will meet up somewhere with the set, we meet up on Leavenworth. We will be like, okay let's see what is at the show. We go to the show. After that show we are drinking and shit. Go to the show. Come back to the corner, chill, make a little money. Go to the club and chill. Bounce and go back to the club. Then after the club, bounce go back to Leaven, make a little money. Then by the time that, our day done finished about 12:00 or 1:00 everybody separates. Go in the house.

Everybody calls each other . . . About 12 or 1 everybody gets in the house and call everybody make sure everybody got in. Nine out of ten we is tipsy. We are tipsy. We might be fucked up but we call to make sure everybody got in safe.’ (HG006)

From the above quote, drinking can be seen not as a solitary activity, but a key component of group life and social interaction.

Partying: Drinking was also an integral component of partying, which frequently overlapped with gang members ‘hanging out’ (Moore, 1991; Moore *et al.*, 1978; Vigil, 1988; Vigil & Long, 1990), and it too operated to maintain and increase social cohesion. Gang members ‘partied’ both at public dance places in the neighborhood or at private parties held in hotel rooms, homes or someone’s garage. Like ‘hanging out’ partying also operated to maintain the cohesion of the group, as can be seen in the following description:

‘It is like brothers and sisters . . . best friends. You know everybody is just chillin’. Everybody talks to each other. Ain’t no, “well that is my man, that is my dude. Don’t look at him”. Ain’t none of that. It’s just like, “What’s up? Everybody want to go get drunk? Everybody want to go to the show?” Go to the carnival. Whatever is going on, we have fun. We don’t worry about petty little things . . . We all just work something out.’ (HG006)

Moreover, as is argued for male-dominated gangs where intoxicated behavior is acceptable because it works to affirm masculinity and male solidarity (see also Dunning *et al.*, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1993; Peace, 1992), so also in female gangs, the frequency and extent of women’s drinking indicates that alcohol use may serve a similar purpose:

‘When all the girls get together it’s “ladies night out”. Then we just, you know, drink or whatever. Just, you know, chopping it up. Gossiping. You know, complaining about our mans and whatever—just talkin’ shit about other people—other girls. Just kickin it.’ (HG018)

In these cases, alcohol operates both to join the women together in one unit, and separate them from the men. In a world defined by the men, this sisterly union around drinking was very important for the women in enhancing their own sense of solidarity. In fact in one of the interviews, the respondent quite vociferously complains when a fellow girl gang member bemoaned the absence of the homeboys:

‘Well, when the girls get together and like we’d be drinking and then—usually between my girlfriends. You know, none of us fight amongst ourselves . . . One time when all of us were kickin’ it and this girl that I was pretty close with. It’s like her true colors came out because she was sayin like, “Ah, what the fuck. Where the hell are the guys” . . . Or somethin’ like that. And that was the first time I ever raised my voice at one of my friends because, you know, I got all like fucked up. You know. It’s like all the girls—you know—ladies night out. Whatever. We’re all supposed to be kickin’ it. Who the fuck cares where the guys are. You know. Just fuckin’ just kick it. It doesn’t matter where the fuck we are. We can be in a fuckin’ cardboard box. You know. We’re happy just bein’

us—just bein' together. And I can't believe she was straight chipping about where the fuck are the guys.' (HG018)

Funerals: Anthropologists have also identified the way in which the symbolic role of alcohol works to maintain group cohesion (Collmann, 1979; MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969; Waddell, 1976). The most striking example of its symbolic role in the gang occurs during funerals of gang members. For example, Campbell (1991) describes how gang members during a drinking session, ritually poured alcohol on the floor prior to drinking from a bottle of rum, which was being passed from one gang member to another. Similar symbolic uses of alcohol were also described by many of our respondents. For example, Helen, a 20-year-old African American described one such event:

'When it happened when he passed and stuff like that we went to the funeral. We shed tears. And then after, we always promise, we will drink for you. And we pour a drink all on the ground for you, that is the tradition. Get a Hennessy and pour it on the ground for my nigger to rest in peace. So we got drunk and was crying, shedding a lot tears. Just sitting somewhere just drinking and thinking about stuff, smoking, thinking about all the times we done had fun, about the times we got drunk and had a fight and you know, men have their fault. It drained me a lot. It scared me because once again he was a part of our clique. He was like a brother or sister. To me, it was like my brother so I shed a lot of tears. And we was real close, spend the night type stuff. And chill.' (HG006)

Many of the women also described extensive drinking taking place after the funerals, which illustrates the extent to which drinking, as in many other funeral ceremonies (Heath, 1975), was an integral part of the mourning process, whether in remembering the dead or encouraging gang members to avenge the death of their compadres:

'People get drunk you know and a lot of the music...everybody talking about pouring a beer on their grave and shit so everybody gets smashed. And here's a 40 for you...pour it out over their grave and shit and everybody already smashed...then that's when they start thinking about what happened. Then...they're I'll go find the mother fucker and they're all drunk and blasted and shit...then like looking for trouble. That's when they go get themselves in trouble for nothing...when someone dies...everybody starts getting fucked up.' (HG009)

Internal violence—'jumping in': Drinking as cohesion is associated with violent activities in two ways in the gang: internally and externally. Internal violence, although potentially disruptive to the group, as we will see in the next section, can be used symbolically to produce greater solidarity, as in the case of induction ceremonies, known as 'jumping-in'. The initiation or the *rite de passage* process by which potential gang members are incorporated into the group has often been associated with some form of physical test. According to Vigil & Long, this process can serve 'to test member's toughness and desire for membership...and to enhance loyalty to the group' (1990, p. 64). While not necessarily occurring in all female gangs (see Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 1997), 59 of our respondents did describe some form of physical endurance.

In addition to gang spectators drinking while the initiation took place, in cases where a physical test was involved respondents reported how they used alcohol as a way of numbing the potential pain that would be inflicted on them:

'Do people usually drink before, during, or after gettin' jumped in?'

'It's like . . . the girls, they mostly drink before not to feel the pain. Not to feel the agony of anything . . . But the boys, they drink afterwards . . . Cuz they want the boys to feel the pain. Us girls get a choice.' (HG029)

Novitiates were on occasion encouraged to get drunk so that they wouldn't get hurt:

'First, you'd have to drink all kinds a beer. We'd just stick Mickey's down their throat—Mickey's . . . or Old English's . . . And then we would get them all drunk, and then we'd kick their ass! . . . I mean we wouldn't like kick or beat them all black and blue and stuff like that; but they'd be so drunk, that they could take the punches more. So that's why we kicked . . . if somebody wasn't drinking, or they didn't have that alcohol in them, then . . . we'd do less fighting. But because they were all buzzed out, they're stupid, you know—there's no pain, no gain.' (F045)

Other respondents mentioned a different explanation for drinking at a jump-in which involved the celebratory component of drinking together to welcome the newcomer into the group after the violence of 'jumping-in' had ended:

'You have to get jumped in . . . Or like there is a circle and you go in the circle and then you are ready. Usually about a minute, sometimes two, depending if they, like they don't want to let you in, they will give you two minutes . . . When they fight back they get it even wilder. After! It's kinda like a celebration. But like you don't want to do it (drink) before because your gonna be all drunk and can't fight, some people can't fight for nothing.' (F008)

External violence: External violence and its associations with drinking encompasses many different types of activities, the most frequent and common occurrence involved fights between members of rival gangs. The reasons for such conflict are varied and include such issues as: gang members testing others; gang members' perceptions that they or their territories have been 'disrespected'; gang members' fears that their turfs are under threat; gang members' attempts to expand their turf; and fighting over the affections of another. In many of these types of external violent activities, whether between male gang members or females, drinking prior to the event is common. An analysis of the young womens' accounts showed that nearly all of these situations erupted spontaneously while drinking and hanging out. The fights were largely over issues related to respect and reputation, referred to as 'dogging,' and 'bad-mouthing'. When the girls were partying, violence among the girls both as offenders and as victims was heightened. According to our respondents, fighting resulted from a combination of heavy drinking and 'looks'. Aggressive and violent encounters with others were usually unplanned, and took place in the context of socializing and drinking with fellow girl gang members. For example, Jeena recounts a recent incident in which she and her girl friends were hanging out on the streets having a few drinks:

'My homegirl was already drinkin' with me. And you know, sometimes there will be days that I feel like, 'okay, I'm gonna just drink a little'. And some days where I just be getting drunk. And that day, I just happened to be getting drunk, and I accidently slipped. I'm like, "Ohh, I seen that bitch [over there] with your man". So she was like, "What? Why didn't you tell me this before? I'm gonna beat this bitch's ass". I was like, "you can't do that, it's hot out here". You know, she was drunk, and she dropped her little cup with the E&J...just dipped off into her ass.' (HG011)

Once the women had been drinking, a conflictual situation with girls from another group could easily erupt:

'We would kick-it a lot at the flea market. Get all drunk and stupid... we were in the restroom. And, then, we came out. And... we had our rags around, and they had their blues, and they start talking shit to us, and we start talking shit to them; and then we all—there was like about six girls who jumped in and fought, you know. But, nobody, did bring no knives out, and we just kicked ass and stuff, and then the security come, separate us and stuff. Sometimes those girls were scarer than the other girls, and they would leave. You know, start crackin' up and talking shit. Most of the time, we used to do that too. Start crackin' up and laughin', and then we'd split, go get beer at the 711 [convenience store] and go to the park and just laugh about what we did. Like, we kicked ass and stuff.' (F045)

On occasion, the respondent described situations where once the drinking had started and the women had become drunk, they then planned to revenge themselves on others who had slighted them in the past:

'Sometimes I be already drunk plotting on a fight. Yeah, I am going to whip this bitch's ass for two days ago because she was on the bus talking shit two days ago. Now two days later, I am drunk now I get to go find her. Now I might do that sometimes.' (HG006)

These violent activities, encouraged by the girls' drinking, worked to bind the group together (Sanders, 1994). The girls' identity as a group was continually reinforced by these conflicts with other gangs, while enforcing a separation of one group from another.

Social division. Conflict within the gang: Just as alcohol operated to maintain and enhance cohesion within the group, it also operated as a divisive feature by creating the environment or circumstances in which potential conflict or tension erupted creating rifts between members. Violence could occur between male members of a gang, between female members, or between males and females. Other examples of internal gang violent activities associated with drinking include fighting between members because of notions of honor, respect, rivalries or tensions. Tensions may arise when two gang members or cliques compete for power or status within the gang, or when two members compete over the affection of another. In some cases the violence appears to occur spontaneously for no specific reason, for example in the following case, violence which broke out at a party became so general that the party was closed down:

'We were dancin' and whatever. And then some guy started freakin'. This guy and this girl were dancin'. And then the guy started gettin' in back of her. Cuz he was dancin' by himself in the crowd. You know. Tryin' to get the girls that the guys were dancin' with. I don't know. And, so, he got in backa this girl and start freakin' her. And she started doin' it back. And so this guy got mad. And they got into a big-ol' rumble. Like, "It's cool. It's cool". But the guy that did all the freakin'... I mean, even the other dude wasn't even trippin'. You know, we were like: nah, nah, nah, he's fucked up. You know. It's cool. You know. The other guy was like, "Nah, fuck that, fuck that. He wants to fight. Fuck it. Let's go? Let's go?" We're like, "Nah. Fuck it". We're like tellin' him to calm down and stuff. But he didn't wanna. He was all pushin' us... And they ended up fighting and shit. And, so, I just remember hell a shit was just goin' everywhere – bottles and everything. My friend got even hit in the head with that shit. I remember her, she was bleeding. Ambulance came and everything. Fucked up the whole party. Everyone had to go home and everything. We got in trouble because we had drinks and we were under age at a garage party with a little D. J.' (F045)

Such descriptions were commonplace in the women's accounts of partying and drinking. In other accounts, incidences of girl gang members' fighting over perceived insults were recounted. For example in the following case, we see the way in which a strong sister-like bond between girl gang members was severed by alcohol:

'Chiquita and Traviesa were at a party. And Chiquita was trippin' off on what Traviesa said that...Chiquita...wasn't wanted anymore... And we were all drinking up...Someone brought Traviesa, and Traviesa walks in. And Chiquita's eyes just flashed. I just seen Chiquita's eyes. And I'm over here enjoying myself. And then Chiquita turns around, and grabs a dish in front of me. When all that broke down...ummm. Traviesa was already conked out. And Chiquita just went up to her like, "Why you talking about shit things?" Dah, dah, dah, dah. And Traviesa said, "I do more shit in this barrio than you do". And dah, dah, dah, dah. Chiquita just grabbed her by her hair and just started whippin' her ass.' (HG029)

In general, our respondents agreed that getting drunk with their fellow girl gang members led them to be more violent with each other, and often for no reason: 'when we are drunk, we are more violent... towards each other... For no reason. It is just the alcohol. Alcohol does that to a person' (HG033).

In some accounts of internal gang conflicts, the violence described involves men and women in the group. In one disturbing incident, a female gang member, when attacked by a number of the male members, was eventually rescued by other girls in the gang:

'It was a time when she (homegirl) got dumped by her boyfriend cuz her boyfriend cheated on her. And she was drinking in this house party one time. And some guy was macking on her. And then they really made her pissed. And then she just start screamin' and yellin' at them. And then... those guys they didn't care if she was a girl or not. They got like 20 of them around her. And then the girls that know the guys, you

know, felt sorry and told them to leave her alone. And someone had to like drag her out the house.’ (HG038)

In some cases, the amount of alcohol consumed prior to a violent event may be so extensive that women cannot remember what happened, as illustrated in the following quote:

‘Fights do break out between girls. Sometimes the guys even slap the girls to calm them down because everybody is all drunk and stupid. I never got slapped . . . [but] maybe I have. I probably wouldn’t remember, cuz there were times when I was like pffff. I don’t know how I got home. You know what I mean.’ (HG045)

Finally, drinking and violence in the group can have long-term divisive effects especially when the violence occurs between men and women. The most extreme cases of this involved sexually violent male behavior, and specifically rape. In the following example, although the Latina respondent felt bad for reporting her homeboy assailant to the police, she nevertheless felt that it was necessary to do so, because he had violated the trust that she felt towards her own homeboys. Moreover, she felt that this trust extended to situations when she was drunk or high:

‘Do any of the homeboys hit on or bother the homegirls sexually?’

‘Well, yeah, it did happen to me once with one of . . . my homeboys . . . I pressed charges on him because he raped me . . . I felt real bad. I didn’t go to the park. I wouldn’t show my face. I wouldn’t hang out with them no more because, you know, I felt so bad because he was from 18th. I had been there for three, four years now and none of them had ever did stuff like that to us . . . But I pressed charges on him, you know, and I told my other friends that day . . . One of ‘em that was real close to him. He’s the friend, right? And he was talking shit to me, telling me oh, I wasn’t supposed to go back and tell him ‘cause I was high when this happened, right? And he was trying to tell me, “Oh, you got drunk with him. It was your fault. You got high with him. That was not right”. And I told him, you know, that I could get high with the other guys and none of this would happen to me, you know? And I could get drunk or whatever with anybody.’ (G606)

Drinking controls. Because drinking was a regular activity for the women, many of the respondents described the various ways gang members attempted to control the behavioral effects of alcohol, either in terms of its consequences for the gang as a whole, or for individual gang members. Significantly, when the respondents discussed issues of control, they appeared less concerned with the drinking itself or even getting drunk, and more with the effects related to drinking or drunkenness.

Loss of control by an individual gang member could potentially result in problematic repercussions for the gang, and often the men in the gang complained that women put the group at risk because they talked too much, especially after they had been drinking. While some of the women suggested that such controls were necessary because it protected the gang, others were less accepting of male controls on an activity which they so enjoyed. For example, in one incident described by a girl gang member, she objected not merely to

attempts to control her drinking, but went further and retaliated both by ignoring the homeboys' attempts and by speeding up her drinking:

'Can you describe to me any times when homeboys try to control homegirls' drinking?'

'Yeah, they do. They say, "Hey girl, you know, slow it down". But then, you know, you don't like any guy telling a woman what to do, of course. So, we just speed it up . . . Then that's when you start drinking faster, and they're telling you this and that, and you don't like a guy to be telling you nothing while your drinking. And then, you know, conflicts start.'
(HG045)

In spite of feeling ambiguous to controls enforced by the homeboys, the young women nevertheless found themselves under an alternative but parallel system of control, one imposed and enforced by their fellow girl gang members and implicitly by themselves.

A key part of a girl gang member's behavior on the street and especially in her relationships with other female gang members was the notion of *respect*. Within the gang, respect and disrespect were ideological expectations and were often the pivotal base for gang relationships, both positive and negative (Bourgois, 1996). A number of elements constituted respect including restraint, especially from excessive drug and alcohol use. To over-indulge was not respectable behavior. So while the drinking and even drunkenness may be acceptable activities for women in the gang, allowing the women a sense of 'time-out' (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969) from notions of control, there still existed boundaries of acceptable behavior beyond which individual female gang members should not stray. Stepping across those boundaries meant that the girl gang member potentially lost respect. Consequently, in the gang a fine dividing line existed. On one side of the line, the women could party and have fun and maintain respect, on the other side, if they became too drunk and behaved in an uncontrolled way, especially if it was judged as sexually promiscuous, then they lost respect. Responsibility for the respect that they received was placed squarely in the hands of the women—they were the guardians. Respect was a characteristic which initially had to be earned and then continually maintained. This evaluative stance among girl gang members is not surprising as others have noted that

what is most significant about the stigma attached to sexual reputation is that young women police each other . . . Such policing has material effects in constricting young women's social life . . . [constraints] . . . on a young woman's sexual expression act as a very effective way of restricting both the expression of her sexuality and her freedom of action—her independence. (Lees, 1996, p. 35)

As in Lees' study of English girls (1996), we find gang girls spending a great deal of energy 'bitching' or casting doubt on others' reputation. This process operates not only as a mechanism of social control, but also of distancing and confirming one's own reputation.

To ensure that respect was maintained by gang members, women used a number of different strategies to regulate and control behavior. Gossip, 'talking shit', and exclusion were all tools for punishing other women whom they felt had stepped out of line. In addition, more positive strategies could be adopted while drinking, which avoided those situations where drinking might lead them to

behave in ways that either tainted their reputation, or placed them at risk from being taken advantage of by the men. Such strategies included 'safe partying' whereby the girls watched 'each others' back' while drinking:

'I mean you ain't gonna go get high and drunk with some guy you just met you know. You gotta have your friends there to make sure you all take care of each other... Like you want to party. Somebody is gonna care for you so once they see you getting a bit too drunk and a guy comes around and tries to like try something with you. They won't let him. They'll be like, well you know she's wasted, you can't be talking to her right now.' (F039)

Respondents rationalized the use of these strategies as a way of circumventing what they perceived to be the 'double standard' for young women. For although drinking and partying was an integral part of gang life for both men and women, women's drinking and the subsequent potential loss of control could taint their reputation rather than enhance it. Therefore, partying with 'just the girls', usually at one of the girl's home or apartment, offered a venue in which they could enjoy themselves in the company of other women and not worry about impugning their reputations. One 17-year-old Latina recalls her first drinking session with her fellow girl gang members. They enjoyed themselves in this setting so much that it eventually became a regular custom for them to get together on their own to 'unload':

'The first time I drank, I drank with my homegirls at my house in the backyard and we were just drinking Millers. We got drunk. Fried. We had fun and then we started crying. So we went upstairs and went to bed. We were crying about whatever we was talking about. Now we pitch in, go to one of the girl's house, and kick back to drink. If you stay on the street, you'll get picked up.' (F023)

In addition to creating the social context in which they could drink more freely, the women also adopted measures to protect one another. For example, one young woman explained how, after a day of drinking and hanging out with the girls, the women work together to ensure that all members of their group are safe:

'About 12:00 or 1:00 everybody gets in the house and calls everybody to make sure everybody got in. Nine out of ten times we is tipsy. We are tipsy. We might be fucked up, but we call to make sure everybody got in safe. And then the next day start back up and you know, go the show, if not shopping. And go have some fun.' (HG006)

Finally, many of the women were keenly aware, especially as a result of their own personal and family experiences, of the need to control their own alcohol consumption and not allow themselves to be controlled by it. Consequently, individual women imposed their own limits on their drinking and on the possibility of losing control: 'I don't really get drunk anymore. I don't like that spinny head feeling. But I usually drink everyday and get a little buzz on' (HG027).

Conclusion

An analysis of drinking by girl gang members enables us to consider the extent to which drinking is an important feature of their lives as they attempt to construct a space for themselves in the masculine world of the street. By examining this issue we sought to uncover the way in which the girls adopted drinking behaviors, which were either primarily reflective of homeboy drinking behaviors, or determined by the social contexts in which these young women operate.

In analyzing the culture of drinking in the lives of girl gang members, the major characteristic we discovered is the extent to which alcohol played a central part in their everyday lives. Alcohol was used not solely for enhancing social interaction with others (although most respondents reported drinking usually with others and rarely alone), but also for other effects they believed were produced by alcohol, such as 'getting hyped up', improving one's self image, and dulling emotional and physical pain (from fighting). We also discovered that female gang members, like their male counterparts, spent much of their daily life engaged in 'hanging out and kicking back', which meant spending long periods of time on the streets, in each others' homes, talking, smoking marijuana, and drinking.

In addition to investigating the characteristics of drinking, we also sought to examine the normative expectations surrounding their drinking. Given the dominant images of these women as either independent masculine girls or sexual appendages, we wished to examine the extent to which their drinking reflected either of these stereotypes. Furthermore, to what extent did life in the gang produce a set of expectations that were significantly different from those controlling female drinking within the wider society? Not surprisingly, just as the growing research on girl gangs has questioned these dominant stereotypes of female gang members, so also our own research produced a more complex picture of female drinking in the gangs. Despite their attempts to define and negotiate a revised feminine identity and negotiate a social space within the male-dominated world of the streets, their drinking and its related behavior was more carefully scrutinized than that of the men. Although their right to drink as girl gang members, even from a relatively early age, and in certain circumstances their right to get drunk, was largely uncontested, this did not mean that they were able to conduct themselves in an uncontrolled manner. To do so would be to lay themselves open to accusations of being unfeminine, thereby breaking acceptable behavior codes. Consequently, the gangs enforced a series of behavior boundaries which functioned to demarcate acceptable and unacceptable behavior for the women while partying. If individual women stepped across these boundaries then they were liable to have their reputations impugned, and subsequently lose respectability—a pivotal feature of girl gang life. The controls that the women operated worked to ensure that fellow girl gang members behaved within the boundaries defined by the group. As a way of ensuring that the women could drink more freely, the girl gang members on occasion partied with just the girls. On such occasions they did not need to worry about their drinking-related behavior tainting their reputations nor did they need to worry about men taking advantage of their inebriated state. This context, free from the presence of the men, was the only situation in which the women found themselves acting in an environment where the wider society's double standards on female drinking did not operate.

The discussion and analysis contained in this paper represents a small, but nevertheless important, corrective to the overwhelming focus in the literature on illicit drugs and male gang members. Although such a corrective is important in the field of gang research, its importance in the field of alcohol research should also be noted. As we mentioned at the start of this paper, and as other writers have also pointed out, alcohol consumption has primarily been examined from a male perspective, and this focus has led to a situation whereby little research exists on the drinking patterns, behaviors, and cultures of female drinking groups. Although the sparsity of a literature on this area can be partly attributed to a bias in favor of research on male drinking, it may also be partly explained by the relative absence of women drinking in public, and the related difficulties of conducting research on the private realm. Within this context, a discussion of drinking by girl gang members is instructive because it allows us not only to examine female drinking, but also consider the extent to which the normative expectations surrounding women's drinking are reflective of expectations within the wider society.

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Notes

- [1] Estimates today range from 10 to 30% of all gang members (Campbell, 1984; Chesney-Lind, 1993; Curry *et al.*, 1994; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Klein, 1995; Moore, 1991).
- [2] See, for example, the recent collected editions by Gefou-Madianou (1992) and McDonald (1994).
- [3] Coders are research assistants who work in the office and are separate from the interviewers.
- [4] A term generally used for male gang members.

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