

# Youth Gangs in Nicaragua: Gang Membership as Structured Individualization

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*In Nicaragua the rise of urban youth gangs has led the government to adopt a crime-control approach that focuses on containing adolescent violence. Yet efforts to foil youth gangs have been ineffectual, largely because the nature of gang membership is little understood. This article presents the results of a qualitative study of youth gang membership in the capital city of Managua. From participant observations and interviews with a cohort of youth gang members and a number of people closely attached to them, the study presents youth perspectives of gang membership in a way that underscores the dialectic between individual agency and the structural environments that impinge on youth choices. The study concludes by arguing that policies aiming to deal with urban youth gangs in Nicaragua must accommodate the perspectives of marginalized urban youth and draw upon their capacity for individual and collective agency.*

## Introduction

In the field of youth studies it is now generally acknowledged that there are connections between the entrenched socio-economic marginalization of impoverished urban communities and the high levels of dissatisfaction and rebelliousness among youth living in such communities. When confronted with little or no opportunity to escape poverty and reverse their marginalized status, many young people respond in ways that are regarded by citizens as deviant and dangerous (Decker & Van Winkle 1996; Furlong & Carmel 1997; Thornberry *et al.* 2003). For the most part, the actions of governments and other influential bodies—schools, churches, and the popular media—serve to reinforce popular perceptions about the dangers of troublesome youth. When fears of youth crime verge on populist ‘moral panic’, the tendency of

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public officials is to assume a discursive high ground by adhering to the notion of adolescence as a 'problematic' period of transition that must be contained (Hall 1977; Schissel 1997). On this basis, policies and programmes are formulated around the intention of controlling and, if possible, re-educating wayward adolescents. Although frequently espousing rhetorical objectives to enhance self-esteem and societal attachment among young people, and to resolve broader social and economic factors that are related to youth exclusion, interventions designed to resolve youth 'problems' too often fail to live up to these ideals. Instead, the treatment of youth who are deemed to be socially problematic is largely shaped by the dominant discourse of containment and control (Griffin 1993; Hayden & Martin 1998; Kelly 1999).

Yet as Foucault and a host of others have asserted, dominant discourses are invariably subject to challenge. 'We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy' (Foucault 1981, p. 101). In line with this premise, troublesome youth frequently reject the dominant view that it is they who must be 'fixed' through the conventions of punishment, re-education, and rehabilitation (Nilan 1999; Tucker 1999). Nowhere has this been more evident than among young people who have become affiliated to youth gangs. In urban landscapes characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment, youth in search of opportunity can easily be drawn to gang membership through a combination of serendipity and choice (Ungar & Teram 2000, p. 243). Because gangs are invariably defined by criminal and usually violent behaviour, understandably they are regarded by mainstream society as the quintessence of youthful deviance. It is therefore widely accepted that youth who have joined gangs must either be rescued or repressed. Yet as research on youth gangs has amply demonstrated, policies that are developed to curb gang activity and to entice young people away from gangs frequently fail because they are essentially framed by perspectives that view young gang members as either benighted or malevolent (Klein 1995; Spergel 1995; Shoemaker 2000). Rarely do interventions accommodate the possibility that gang membership represents a way for many adolescents to stand up to mainstream social institutions that are too ready to dismiss them as a marginalized underclass.

Clearly the challenge for those who work with young people caught up in criminal urban gangs is to counter the discourse of youth as a social problem by striving to formulate alternative visions and strategies that are grounded in the perspectives of youth themselves. Although by no means easy to accomplish, a reasonable first step, as Rudd and Evans have argued, is to 'map out young people's attitudes and beliefs' (1998, p. 41) and the ways they create their own opportunities and social identities in highly constricted circumstances. From this perspective, by engaging gang members to articulate interpretations of their own experiences and the reasoning that underlies their behavioural choices, researchers and youth workers should come closer to 'de-pathologizing' adolescents who have been drawn into youth gangs (Unger & Teram 2000, p. 230). In so doing, however, it is important to temper an appreciation of the autonomy and decision-making capabilities of youth who have gravitated to gangs with an acknowledgement of the structural forces that strongly influence dominant

norms and attitudes, and that limit the possibilities available for young people growing up in impoverished situations.

### **Youth Gangs in Nicaragua: The Context of Policy, Structure, and Agency**

This need to listen to young people attached to gangs has become particularly significant in Nicaragua. Following two decades of civil war, natural disasters, and severe economic crisis, the majority of Nicaraguan youth are languishing in situations of severe impoverishment. In Managua, the capital city, with an estimated 60 per cent of adolescents out of school and with few prospects of employment beyond street hawking or low paid part-time labour (Diario La Prensa 2002), growing numbers of young males as well as females have been grouping themselves into neighbourhood gangs in lieu of any other type of legitimate social organizations available to them [1]. Territorial in nature, youth gangs in Managua have been identified as increasingly responsible for organized violence, sometimes targeted at figures of authority or affluence, but most often directed towards individual youth and other rival gangs. The most commonly reported youth gang offences involve property damage, armed robbery, assaults, and murder (Diario La Prensa 2002). Fuelled by sensational media accounts that often depict urban adolescents as increasingly dissolute and dangerous, public anxiety about organized youth crime has steadily risen.

In response, police and government authorities in Managua have periodically undertaken efforts to crack down on youth gangs and to reduce incidents of juvenile delinquency. Yet such measures have been largely ineffective. Since the demise of the Sandinista revolution and the defeat of the governing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional in 1990, Nicaragua has been severely weakened by chronic indebtedness, a stagnant economy, and the venality of a powerful landed elite. In this context, post-revolutionary governments have had neither the capability nor the will to ensure the social welfare of the majority of impoverished Nicaraguans (Paguaga 2002). Overwhelmed by a preoccupation with financial austerity and structural adjustment, the state's approach to social issues has been infused by a strong current of fiscal and social conservatism. In this economic and ideological context, children who are unable to attend school and who lack employment and tangible family support are widely regarded as living in 'irregular situations' that are seedbeds of social deviance (García-Méndez 1998). Sustained by popular perceptions about the dangers of seemingly aimless and dispossessed 'minors', a central precept of this 'doctrine of irregular situations' is the need to protect society from juvenile delinquency through a crime-control approach. Emphasizing intimidation and containment, crime control in Nicaragua is generally oblivious to the detrimental circumstances in which many children have to grow up (Fandiño 2000).

The most notable example of this reactionary approach to youth crime was the introduction in 1999 of the government's Gang Plan [2]. Following a spate of newspaper and television reports that suggested an epidemic of organized youth violence in Managua, the Gang Plan was formulated with the express purpose of curbing gang activity and discouraging young people from joining gangs. Officially

launched just prior to the national elections of 2000, the Plan makes passing reference to the socio-economic antecedents of youth delinquency and to the need for the education and rehabilitation of young offenders (Government of Nicaragua 1999, pp. 1–4). Yet because its primary objective has been to clamp down on visible youth crime and to restore a sense of security among the urban populace, the Plan has not led to an increase or an improvement in social assistance for marginalized youth in the slums of Managua. Instead, it has served to justify heavy-handed police tactics that often wink at judicial due process.

In this context of increasing concerns about youth crime and the intermittent implementation of retaliatory but largely ineffectual crime control measures, it is striking how little understanding there is about the nature of youth gangs in Nicaragua and the reasons that have led many urban adolescents to become gang members. In an effort to help rectify this knowledge gap, the authors undertook a qualitative case study of youth gang membership in an urban district of Managua. In so doing, our starting point was to conceptually acknowledge the intersecting dynamics of youthful agency and the structural environments that impinge on the choices youth make. Similar to other authors who have contributed to the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Macdonald 1998; Rudd & Evans 1998; Wyn & Dwyer 1999; Cahill 2000; Green *et al.* 2000; Raffo & Reeves 2000), we recognize the dialectic that often exists between adolescent capacity for autonomy and choice, and the broader social circumstances that both shape as well as constrain young people's decisions and actions. As outlined by Rudd and Evans (1998), the notion of 'structured individualization' is helpful in deconstructing this dialectic. Accordingly, while the life chances of young people are strongly affected by factors of local environment and by dominant ideological, political, and socio-economic forces, it is nonetheless important not to forget the individualized aspects of youth development and decision-making. Whatever their circumstances, young people interpret their experiences and strive to make sense of the influences that affect them in unique ways. Where opportunities are limited or non-existent, they will often endeavour to establish social groupings and undertake collective actions that compensate for lack of resources and environmental support (Pombeni *et al.* 1990; Sokal 2003). In such circumstances, although the choices they make may entail high degrees of risk, invariably these choices and the actions that ensue also tend to augment a sense of personal empowerment and strong social identity (Wyn & Dwyer 1999).

Yet it is also necessary to relate the choices of individual youth, and the perceptions they have of their own autonomy and control, with the broader circumstances of their lives. It is at this juxtaposition of agency and structure that incompatibilities are often evident (Rudd & Evans 1998, pp. 60–61). Consequently, our challenge in attempting to discern the experiences and perspectives of young people attached to gangs in Managua was to assess whether there is indeed an incongruity between the aspects of gang membership that appeal to youth and the perpetuation of the risks and socio-economic marginalization with which they must continually live.

## **The Study**

Since the aim of this study was to understand the reasoning and experiences of a particular subgroup of Nicaraguan adolescents who shared the common experience of youth gang membership, we combined participant observation and semi-structured interviewing as a way to elicit the narratives of a cohort of youth gang members and others closely connected to them, and to relate these narratives to the social context in which these youth were living. From May 2000 to March 2002, one of the authors (M. Sotelo) was a research consultant working with the Centro de Información y Asesoría en Salud (CISAS). A national non-government organization (NGO) founded in 1983, CISAS has worked for more than a decade in various neighbourhoods of District VI, a large municipal zone in Managua. As part of his responsibilities, Sotelo served as CISAS' representative on two separate commissions that had been established to improve services for youth in the district [3]. Having had extensive experience as a youth coordinator in the former Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista) government, Sotelo also spent considerable time meeting with youth in District VI—sometimes in the context of civic group meetings, at other times more informally in neighbourhood streets. In this way we were able to identify 150 adolescents who were actively involved in eight gangs in the district. Over a period of several months, following initial contact with small cohorts of gang members, the authors met at various times with these youth, sometimes on a one-to-one basis and at other times in small groups [4]. These informally conducted meetings were guided by three fundamental objectives: to learn about what led these youth to become gang members; to gain an appreciation of their personal experiences as gang members; and to listen to their views about their future prospects.

Apart from informal one-on-one exchanges with individual youth, which were recorded in field notes, six focus group interviews were conducted with 35 youth gang members (30 males and five females). Ranging in age from 13 to 21 years, most of them had completed their primary school education. None, however, had continued on to secondary school. The family backgrounds of these youth were replete with problems of unemployment, domestic violence, loss of one or both parents, prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse, and a variety of petty crimes. All of them had experienced difficulties with the police, and about one-third had spent short periods of time in jail either for petty theft or for violent behaviour. In addition to the interviews with gang members, two separate focus groups were conducted with six mothers and two fathers, respectively. Two further focus group interviews were conducted with 10 staff members of local NGOs that have been involved in community assistance programmes in District VI. Focus group interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed and translated from Spanish to English. Analysis of the transcripts and notes was essentially a phenomenological process that involved careful reading of the collated information so as to ascertain the meaning and significance that these youth attributed to their own lived realities (the phenomenon) of gang membership. As with all qualitative researchers, we were thus our own 'instruments' of data collection and analysis. As such, the meanings that we attribute

to what we saw and heard conceivably might not coincide with the findings of other qualitative investigators using different analytical frameworks. This is a perennial limitation of this type of inquiry (Creswell 1998). Nevertheless, as our analysis of the data was a collaborative process enhanced by our familiarity with the context of District VI and our knowledge of economic and socio-political developments in Nicaragua, we are confident in the authenticity of the thematic issues that we have discerned and the representativeness of the brief interview excerpts that we have chosen to highlight.

### **Community and Family: The Effects of Urban Poverty and Civic Disarray**

District VI is the largest of Managua's municipal zones. With an estimated 350,000 residents living in 180 demarcated 'subzonal' neighbourhoods, and with a steady influx of immigrants arriving from the impoverished central and northern regions of Nicaragua, the population of the district is growing rapidly (Ministry of Education 2003). So too are its social and economic problems. Infrastructure such as potable water, electricity and sewage are in short supply. Poor health is endemic. While three health clinics offer free consultations in the district, many people are unable to buy medicines required for treatment (Centro de Salud de Villa Venezuela 1997). Unemployment in the district is high—an estimated 60 per cent of individuals who are eligible for work are without jobs. Another 20 per cent are assumed to be working in the informal economic sector, mainly as street and market vendors (Avendaña 2002). This leaves only 20 per cent of the district's working age population employed in full-time public or private sector jobs, most of which are poorly paid (Avendaña 2002).

An elected municipal council is ostensibly responsible for taxation, security, and the coordination of social services in the district. There are also numerous neighbourhood civic groups, most of which are formally attached to the national Communal Movement, a Sandinista-inspired coalition of community associations. Yet despite these representative bodies, the daily struggle experienced by most people to meet their own basic needs has fostered an ethos of corrosive competition and mistrust, and thus has undermined the development of strong civic ties. Schools in the district are poorly equipped, there are very few recreational facilities, and there are no regularly scheduled sporting or social events for out-of-school youth. In district neighbourhoods that are largely ghettoized by their underclass status, daily life for many youngsters is monotonous and devoid of purpose. In discussing their immediate social environment, parents of gang members who were interviewed for this study commonly bemoaned the lack of social unity.

Impoverishment and lack of opportunities to engage in legitimate social and economic activities has fostered an exclusionary environment for the young people of District VI. Exposed as they are to commercial images of materialist opportunity and prosperity—media-fed images that are legitimated by the evident connection between wealth and power—the prospect of lifelong underclass status is demoralizing for these youth. Gang members with whom we spoke expressed profound resentment about the dearth of district-wide opportunities and support for youth.

When there is no opportunity, you feel like less than other people ... Sometimes you cry, because you see with your own eyes the opportunities that other people have ... and you want it [*sic*], but there is no one that comes or that supports you or that gives you this opportunity. (Gang member)

In this context of communal fragmentation and socio-economic exclusion, family life is often stressful. Housing in District VI is seriously inadequate, with often two or more families obliged to live under the same roof. Family breakdown and single parenthood are common; an estimated one-third of families in District VI are headed by single mothers (Fandiño 2000). Vitiated by endemic poverty, cramped living space, and frequent bouts of domestic violence, many homes are unable to provide security and support for children. Not surprisingly, many young people simply abandon their homes to live in the streets. All parents whom we interviewed for this study were acutely conscious of the detrimental effects of impoverishment and domestic instability on childhood development. Equally evident among parents was a clear recognition that while family indigence is a source of adolescent despondency, it also tends to generate youth resolve to resist the poverty and powerlessness of their childhood circumstances. Yet with few viable opportunities, these young people are forced to look to alternative ways to channel their energies.

The youths look at their parents with the worry about money, and then they go out into the street to look for work, and since they can't find it, there is nothing left but to think about robbery. (Parent)

For most youth in District VI the immediate socio-economic environment is one that is harsh, frequently violent, and offers them minimal recreational and occupational outlets. With little or no access to resources and services that might otherwise provide them with psychological and social assistance, many are thus drawn to attachments that reflect a shared antagonism against their penurious circumstances and their collective search for alternative social arrangements.

### **The Waning Promise of Education**

For many impoverished youth and their families, the most legitimate way to avoid a life of joblessness and poverty is through education. Ironically, however, the formal school system in Nicaragua exacerbates the marginalization of indigent children and youth. Teaching practices remain largely authoritarian and dogmatic, emphasizing discipline, conformity, and the transmission of a fixed body of curricular knowledge (Arnove 1995). Sustained by the powerful sway of the Catholic Church, children are commonly viewed as dependents who must comply unquestioningly to all forms of adult authority (García-Méndez 1998). Dominance, obedience, and passive learning are the foundations of relations between teachers and pupils.

These discrepancies of power in education have been accentuated by an incipient privatization of Nicaragua's school system. Over the past decade, with successive governments strapped by indebtedness and pressures for fiscal retrenchment, the state has been unable to sustain the full costs of public education (Gershberg 1999; *Diario la Prensa* 2002). This has not only resulted in an increase in the direct educational costs

that families have had to bear, but it has also transformed education into a marketable good that is out of financial reach for many inhabitants of District VI. Lack of public funds and private means have severely curtailed the availability of schooling in District VI. By 2001, out of an estimated 58,000 eligible youth aged 13–18 years, less than 20,000 were officially enrolled in schools [5]. Two out of every three adolescents had either dropped out of the school system or had never enrolled at all.

Besides inhibiting the educational prospects of poor children, the ‘marketization’ of schooling has also had the effect of commodifying teacher–pupil relations. Among numerous gang members interviewed for this study, reflections on education brought forth acerbic claims about exploitive teachers intent on augmenting their meagre salaries. This comment typifies the breadth of youth disillusion with the school system in District VI:

One of the systematic exams is worth 40. [The teacher] doesn’t give us the exam, but gives us the 40 points. But we have to go and pay every Saturday to receive class from him, and each hour of class costs 20 cordobas [6]. If you don’t go, you lose 10 points ... [and] you come out badly. (Gang member)

Hopes in the benefits of education continue to be embraced by the inhabitants of District VI. Yet it is evident that the unmitigated ‘screening’ function of schooling, which results in most children abandoning school in their early teens, engenders widely held perceptions of failure among many youngsters. A family’s inability to pay school fees is a stark indication of household penury and a source of public ignominy for children and parents alike.

If we don’t pay the tuition, they don’t give us the exams, they hold us back. It’s shaming, because you are in front of all your classmates and they start to read your name, those that owe [tuition], and as a kid you feel humiliated. (Gang member)

In contrast to the ideal of education as a social investment for the common good, schooling in Nicaragua is now widely regarded as a personal investment in an increasingly competitive social context. Much of the onus for encouraging and supporting the education of children therefore lies with parents and guardians. Yet too often the admonishment that families should support their children’s schooling obscures the disparities of wealth and power that directly affect educational access and achievement. In reality, a highly stratified and increasingly privatized school system has fomented an identity of exclusion and failure among vast numbers of Nicaraguan youth. Having experienced multiple instances of rejection and negative labelling from the very institutions that are most essential for their positive social development, growing numbers of youth in District VI believe that their only recourse for personal and social valorization is through collective actions that contravene the norms and values of the institutions that have discarded them.

### **The Allure of Gangs**

As many studies of youth gangs have shown, when disadvantaged adolescents are confined to impoverished urban neighbourhoods in which bonds of communal trust and support are conspicuously lacking, the latitude for youth to develop strong social

identities and mutually reinforcing relationships is severely restricted (Klein 1995; Decker & Van Winkle 1996; DeCesare 1998; Thornberry *et al.* 2003). When it becomes evident that their marginal status is rendered permanent by the impossibility of achieving standards and goals that are validated by the broader national society, the formation of youth gangs is frequently an extension of the natural adolescent inclination to connect socially. This sequential process has become common in District VI.

As articulated by the youth gang members interviewed for this study, the gang is regarded—at least initially—as an oasis of security from a social environment that is not only stultifying, but is also fearful and violent. For many youth, attachment to a gang fills the psychological and social void that emanates from their experiences of family, school, and an aloof adult-dominated community. With no other social institutions providing regular occupational outlets, gangs function as surrogate families that alleviate youthful feelings of powerlessness and fulfil their needs for intimacy and personal reassurance. The gang is where the ‘action’ is. Camaraderie, pride, and a sense of belonging are all attributes that youth interviewees identified as accruing from their attachment to gangs.

Really, what with my family and all, that’s what made me be [with the gang], because I’m with friends, they understand me, they know how I feel with them, better than with my family that doesn’t understand me. (Female gang member)

Beyond the social advantages that accrue from gang membership, there are other material benefits identified by our youth respondents. For some, their first gang experiences centred on the provision of temporary relief from the immediate effects of poverty. Food, clothes, and a helping hand are effective ways of drawing youngsters into the gang fold.

You join gangs because you’re looking for a way to de-stress, [and] also because you’re hungry. Some friends will give you food, and you get along well. Sometimes you don’t have clothes, and a guy will come give you some pants, ... and it’s all very nice, and if you have a problem, they help, and it’s like a chain, very hard to break. (Gang member)

Over time, gang membership is widely perceived as the principal means of obtaining material commodities that are otherwise impossible to obtain either individually in the street or in fruitless efforts to pursue schooling and legitimate employment. Most of the youth interviewed for this study held aspirations for material possessions and social prestige. These, of course, are the normative tenets of middle-class success. Yet precisely because the social institutions of middle-class society are closed off to most underclass Nicaraguan youth, gang membership offers an alternative way to improve their material and social status. As several of our respondents indicated, it is through the collective strength and shared audacity of the gang that they are able to obtain money, drugs, and—above all—a sense of power. Time and again, as exemplified by this one excerpt, youth interviewees expounded on the collective strength that accrues from gang membership.

I joined to get attention, be respected, ... I was going to be somebody, the grown ups weren’t going to look down at me ... If I see a pretty girl go by, I flirt with her. What’s the

guy with her going to say to me? Maybe he's with one or two other guys, but I'm with a whole group. And the guys ... won't joke around with me, because they see I'm a gang member, and they wouldn't think of messing up the group. (Gang member)

As this statement also clearly indicates, an ethos of violence and territoriality permeates gang activity in District VI. Staking out turf claims and engaging in violent actions in defence of these claims, as other studies of gangs have consistently shown, are ways to reinforce group solidarity and accentuate the boundaries that exist between a gang and all others in the community (Ferrell 1997; DeCesare 1998). Through the threat of violent aggression, gang members assert the strength that lies at the core of their collective identity. As a number of our respondents attested, because acts of violence are the principal ways that gang members achieve material and social ends, the *reputation* for violence is an important characteristic that underscores gang solidarity. In this regard, popular media is significant. While children's-rights activists frequently bemoan the sensationalism of media reports on youth crime and youth gang aggression in Managua, gang members appear to have an alternative perspective. In the view of several youth whom we interviewed, the published and widely circulated stories of organized youth violence actually enhance their sense of collective strength and identity. By exacerbating middle-class fears of youth on the rampage, mainstream media reports of youth violence perversely help to augment the sense of power that these otherwise dispossessed urban adolescents feel.

It ends up being like a ranking, a competition, ... [to be] the gang in first place, or that gets mentioned most. Because if your group gets talked about most, you feel proud. You think, 'We're the first, we're the best'. (Gang member)

As all our youth respondents indicated, gang membership allows them to 'fit' in with a community of peers. It provides them with feelings of stability and confidence that they are unable to attain in other ways. Excluded from mainstream social institutions, and having no obvious prospects for personal fulfilment as defined by a dominant middle-class discourse in Nicaragua, they have opted for gang membership as a way to attain a positive social identity and a semblance of control over their lives. The gang provides them with a social framework through which they can construct who it is they are in relation to their peers and to the larger social system. By facilitating their participation in collective activities oriented towards the specific ends of status and power, gangs help to augment youth self-esteem. At the same time, however, these young people are aware that there is a price to be paid for gang membership. In making the decision to join gangs, most youth recognize that they have placed themselves in overt opposition to dominant social institutions. Yet in the absence of resources and other choices, it is gang membership that offers them the social bonding and support that they ardently desire.

### **The Pernicious Irony of Gang Membership**

From the perspective of the youth we interviewed, there is no doubt that in the impoverished circumstances of District VI, gang membership fills a basic adolescent need for interdependence and the self-assurance that derives from participating in a

peer-based social network. Yet underlying these elements of personal and collective empowerment is an unavoidable irony that many of our young respondents themselves recognized. The social cohesiveness and sense of strength that are prominent features of gang membership are sustained by violent struggle, usually against other youth gangs, and by opposition against mainstream social institutions—schools, police, municipal government, and civic associations. Having sought meaningful attachments and a basis for positive identity formation, inevitably gang members find themselves restricted by the very ties they initially found to be liberating, and constantly fearful of the forces from which they sought protection.

Well, in my case, I can't go where the Sabañas are, because I'm a Rocco, and they'll get me. And in Santa Ana [a District VI neighbourhood]—I can't go there. If they see me on the bus, they'll get me and beat me. (Female gang member)

The driving impulse of gang activity is aggression. Over time, as all gang members come to realize, this is an attribute that exacerbates their pariah status within their own families and neighbourhoods. Although these youth regard their attachment to gangs as the sole recourse to prospects of marginality in the larger social context, ultimately gang membership fails to resolve this problem. Instead, the pervasiveness of aggression and violence that is embedded in gang culture reinforces their exclusion from more benign social networks. In turn, as many of our respondents indicated, the stigmatization of gang membership, coupled with the lack of obvious alternative social arrangements, make it difficult for them to withdraw from gangs.

When you're in, it's like a mafia, ... [it's hard] to get out. It's not that they'll do anything to you if you do leave, but when you leave the gang, other people look at you differently ... (Gang member)

Yeah, the damage is done. (Gang member)

For older youth in District VI who have been attached to gangs for extensive periods of time, as well as for their parents, there are intimations of deep pessimism. Where initial attachment to gangs is often a rational response to the lack of legitimate social support mechanisms, older youth generally recognize that, in the long term, gang membership in the impoverished context of District VI is a baleful social trap. Caught up in the violence and social insularity of the gang, some of our older respondents articulated a sense of fatalism.

We have been brought up in violence, we live in violence...If we don't have the opportunity to better ourselves, the violence is just going to increase until ... we are in jail or we are dead. (Gang member)

As this youth had discerned, the collective strength that emanates from their membership in gangs is a pernicious irony. Although they joined gangs for social attachments and a sense of empowerment in an otherwise disordered and alienating neighbourhood environment, gang membership in fact intensifies their isolation from mainstream social institutions and hinders their prospects of engaging in activities that are less harmful to themselves and to those closest to them. Once caught up in the violence and segregated social confines of the gang, there is little likelihood that their

transition into adulthood will be free from the impoverishment and cascading series of difficulties from which gang membership has offered an illusory refuge.

### **Gang Membership as Structured Individualization: Challenges for Policy and Intervention**

In view of the limited scope of this inquiry we are not in a position to offer conclusive generalizations about youth gangs in Nicaragua and why some adolescents become gang members and others do not. Since non-gang youth did not participate in the focus group interviews, further research involving a broader comparative sampling of youth in District VI and in other areas of Managua is needed to evoke a broader range of youth perspectives. Nevertheless, the interpretations that we have drawn from our observations and interviews do coincide with the findings of similar inquiries elsewhere. As research on impoverished urban youth has repeatedly shown, the processes of identity formation and social development are severely limited for children who grow up in conditions of excessive poverty. In defiance of the structural barriers that foist an undesirable identity upon them, an alternative for some youth is to band together and engage in activities that enhance their sense of well-being even as they contravene mainstream norms and standards (DeCesare 1998; McIntyre 2000). This is essentially what we learned about youth gang membership in District VI, a social environment that is a source of frustration and anxiety for vast numbers of youth. Shunted away from families, education, and meaningful work, the great majority of adolescents living in the district have almost no possibility to find fulfilment through mainstream social structures. Unable to alter their underclass status, the youth we interviewed had opted to join neighbourhood gangs. Despite the affront to dominant social norms, their gang affiliation enabled them, at least initially, to attain a heightened sense of personal control and social status.

Yet there is a fundamental incompatibility between youthful perceptions of individual empowerment as a function of gang membership and the violent and competitive nature of gangs themselves. In Managua the emergence of urban youth gangs over the past decade is clearly related to pervasive structural inequities that— notwithstanding the socialist Sandinista revolution of the 1980s—are deeply rooted in the economic and socio-cultural dispositions of Nicaraguan society. Paradoxically, although very much a manifestation of violent opposition to mainstream social institutions that help sustain such inequities, the gangs are themselves offshoots of the structures that they oppose. For the fact is that although gang affiliation appears to relate to the exercise of adolescent agency, both in terms of the decision to join and the semblance of personal strength and security that subsequently emerge, gangs are integrally connected to social and institutional influences that young gang members are striving to escape or resist. Rather than undermining the structural arrangements that sustain the prevailing socio-economic inequities, the predilection of some marginalized youth to engage in the collective violence and criminal behaviour associated with gang membership serves to distract attention away from their conditions of poverty and the limited educational and occupational opportunities available to them. Their outcast status helps to legitimize the prevailing discourse of

crime control with its focus on individual punishment and rehabilitation as principal ways to contain juvenile delinquency (Maclure & Sotelo 2003). Consequently, instead of strengthening challenges to an inequitable status quo, the decisions and actions of young people who are engaged in gang activity inadvertently augment censure and exclusion from mainstream social institutions.

Clearly, for children's rights groups that are concerned about the need to improve the lot of impoverished youth and to diminish the dead end vortex of fear and violence integral to gang membership in Nicaragua, it is imperative to develop policies and strategies that depart from the discourse of crime control with its focus on containing adolescent 'deviance'. In this respect, a valuable referential basis is the Nicaraguan Code of Childhood and Adolescence (commonly referred to as 'the Code') [7]. Passed into law in 1998 following persistent pressure on the government from a coalition of national NGOs, international humanitarian agencies, and organized remnants of the Sandinista revolution, the Code draws upon the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Nicaragua is formally committed as a signatory state. As asserted in the Code, a fundamental right for all children is to be treated as 'subjects' of special rights rather than as 'objects' of authoritarian interventions (Government of Nicaragua 1998). Accordingly, a starting point for interventions designed to respond to the issue of urban youth gangs is to strengthen lines of communication and dialogue with youth themselves. Institutional arrangements need to be created that not only encourage marginalized youth to reflect upon and to speak about their situations and concerns, but that also allow them to participate actively in developing and managing youth-oriented activities. By drawing upon the individual and collective agency that gang members and non-gang youth alike are fully capable of exercising, interventions that deal with juvenile delinquency and violence are likely to be more successful than the conventional crime control approach of punitive actions and individually targeted rehabilitation programmes.

In District VI a number of organized initiatives have been undertaken in which youth were engaged as *bona fide* participants in forums of planning and administrative decision-making [8]. Yet as experience has repeatedly shown, along with the necessary involvement of youth themselves, social programmes that aim to reduce the appeal of gang membership and to enhance the welfare and life chances of marginalized urban youth in poor and indebted countries such as Nicaragua invariably require coalitions of civic groups, government authorities, and judicious international technical and financial assistance. Clearly this is a formidable challenge, for despite the growth of child and youth rights organizations in Nicaragua, and the increasing international attention that has been directed to the plight of marginalized children in much of the developing world, support for children and youth is often conducted through the form of discrete, generally short-lived projects that sometimes appear to be small 'jewel boxes, ... beautifully crafted efforts' (Deweese & Klees 1995, p. 93), but are rarely able to reduce either the magnitude or the systemic nature of youth marginality. In large part this is because struggles to alter entrenched ideological perspectives concerning marginalized youth and to develop strategies of youth assistance that run counter to the predominant discourse of control and containment tend to be de-centred and

fragmented. As the authors discovered in District VI, coalitions of NGOs, community associations, government representatives, and international donors that have a shared interest in reducing youth crime and violence also tend to shift in time and place as local leaders come and go, as organizational priorities change, and as resource bases fluctuate or shrink (Maclure & Sotelo 2004).

Nevertheless, to conclude on a hopeful note, it is useful to reflect on Foucault's notion of networks or webs of power (Barrett 1991). Efforts to improve the conditions and treatment of urban youth who are otherwise likely to be drawn into gang-related crime and violence necessitate an array of diverse struggles in a multitude of different sites. Although there is no magic bullet, nor a single set of policies that can redress the circumstances of poverty and despair that confront many indigent youth in Managua, increased understanding of the interconnections between the articulated concerns of individual youth and the socio-economic environments that shape and constrain their locus of comprehension and behaviour may help to foster more effective social policies and programmes for these young people. Clearly the desire for more and better education, and for work opportunities that absorb the energies of youth and bring dignity and purpose to their lives, should be the basis of concerted social action. Local coalitions consisting of governmental, non-governmental, and youth representation should strive to determine specific educational and occupational priorities for youth that are appropriate for each district. In addition, to ensure the necessary provision of political capital and resource investments, local coalitions should consistently advocate the legal and moral imperatives of Nicaragua's own Code of Childhood and Adolescence, and simultaneously develop and expand alliances with central government officials and the community of international aid agencies. Lobbying for international debt relief, for fair terms of trade, and for increased social expenditures on education and health are as critical as the creation of educational and employment opportunities at local levels.

As the voices of youth gang members in District VI revealed to us, their actions and perceptions are a function of their social environments. For all who are therefore concerned about the 'problem' of youth gangs in Managua—and indeed in other major urban areas in Latin America—the pressing challenge is to transform the social environment from one that regularly marginalizes vast numbers of youth into one that engages youth agency for progressive and productive change. In Nicaragua this will require significant structural changes and a shift in the prevailing discourse of crime control as the way to manage troubled youth. While a growing child and youth rights movement in Nicaragua is suggestive of progress in this direction, the diminishment of structural constraints and ideological stances that have marginalized vast numbers of Nicaraguan youth will likewise require continuing efforts to democratize Nicaraguan society at all levels and to ensure the provision of long-term international support.

## Notes

- [1] Estimates of the number of youth involved in gang activity are extraordinarily difficult to obtain. However, the government's Secretariat of Youth has estimated that in 1999 there were 88 youth gangs in various districts of Managua, and that by 2001 there were 118 gangs. Based

on our own field work, including conversations with police, community officials, and youth gang members themselves, we surmise that gangs comprise anywhere from 30 to 50 youth each. To date there is every reason to assume the number of youth gangs has continued to rise and that currently there are well over 5000 young people who are actively involved in youth gangs in Managua (Diario La Prensa 2002).

- [2] Formally entitled the Integrated Development Plan for the Prevention of Juvenile Violence (*el Plan de Desarrollo Integral para la Prevencion de la Violencia Juvenil*), it was soon simply referred to as the Gang Plan.
- [3] These were the District VI municipal government's Youth Violence Prevention Commission, and a joint NGO–government body known officially as the Intersectoral Commission for Integrated Care of Adolescents.
- [4] Maclure, who lives in Canada, participated in field-based interviews during the course of two trips to Managua.
- [5] Figures procured from the education office of the district Municipal Council.
- [6] 15.5 NIO (Nicaraguan Cordoba Oro) is approximately equivalent to US\$1.00.
- [7] *el Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia*.
- [8] Three such initiatives—a set of school-based actions, a community policing programme, and a series of civic activities supported by an international donor agency—are described and examined at length in Maclure and Sotelo (2004).

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