Cholas, Mexican-American Girls, and Gangs¹

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Based on interviews with twenty-one present and former female gang members, this study focuses on Mexican-American gang girls as they operate within the Mexican-American gang milieu in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, California. The violence demanded of gang members is described within the context of the gang subculture. Gang structure, activities, attachment to the group and internalization of the norms of that group, reasons for joining the gang, the group as a source of motivation and support, and sanctions applied to maintain group cohesion are described from the point of view of the gang member herself, providing an internal understanding of her world.

Urban sprawl, population growth, high unemployment, changing immigration patterns, and urban recession have moved street gangs out of low-income, inner-city neighborhoods where poverty, racial division, and high unemployment contributed to their formation. Today, there are at least 600 gangs with an estimated 100,000 gang members operating in Los Angeles County, and their impact is felt throughout the city including the once more affluent suburban areas. Los Angeles has been dubbed the “gang capital of the world,” where every school and community is impacted in some way. In 1991, 770 murders were gang related, making 1991 the seventh consecutive year of record gang killings. While many of these were attributed to black gangs, the incidence of violent crimes and gang activity on the part of Mexican-American gangs is also on the increase.

Mexican-American gangs have existed in the barrios of Los Angeles for as long as 70 years, and females have been active within those gangs since that time. The Pachucos, active in the twenties and thirties, the forerunners of today’s Mexican-American gangs, developed styles and rituals

concerning dress, manners, and social attitudes, which have become inherent in the social world of the barrios today. It is interesting to note that the modern version of the Pachuco, today's Cholos and Cholas (gang members) have developed a lifestyle and dress similar to the Pachuco innovators. The difference today is that cultural patterns have become far more debilitating including more frequent drug use and violence which has escalated to include far more gang killings.

This study focuses on Mexican-American gang girls as they act within the Mexican-American gang milieu in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. Twenty-one female present and former gang members were interviewed concerning participation in and attitudes toward gang activities. The interviews were extensive, on-going over a year period, sometimes individually and sometimes in groups, and took place in many different locales — homes of the gang girls, the neighborhood center, my home, street corners, the barrio, the park — to provide an in-depth view of the world of the Chola, the gang girl. The study attempts to understand this subculture from the world-view of the Chola.

Females form an intricate, cohesive and significant sub-group within all Mexican-American gangs. In some cases, the female cliques appear to be stronger and more active than the male cliques; in other cases, female gang members are subservient to the more dominant male members.

Mexican-American gangs as they operate in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles are loosely organized groups of young people who become deeply involved in a subculture that leads to gang membership, enabling core members to achieve the highest awards of power, esteem, and a strong sense of identity. The most active members range in age between 13 and 16; younger persons may have the affect — the dress and behavior — in preparation for becoming core gang members, older members begin to decrease their involvement in intense gang activity while maintaining identification as a gang member as they enter into adulthood. Gangs are usually named after the street, housing project, or barrio from which the gang originates. Members identify closely with their neighborhood or "hood" and it is this name they tattoo on themselves and write on walls throughout the city.

Gangs are composed of divisions of cliques (klikas), roughly based on age cohort with divisions of either males or females. In a sense, the gang is similar to the army, the divisions operating with some autonomy yet loyal to the hood, ostensibly operating to protect the neighborhood but in actuality operating to promote prized violent behaviors. Several of the females in this study were members of Pacas Flats, for example, which contains three female divisions, loosely based on age, Tiny Locas, Chiquitas, and Juanitas. In this gang, membership in the original clique is maintained. The entire clique moves from being the youngest clique, through their most