

Life in a Gang

Victor Rios's work is part of a long tradition of scholarship that has relied on the use of fieldwork techniques to study “at promise” (at risk) youth and/or gangs in inner cities, including Thrasher's (1927) classic study of gangs in Chicago, and others, including Whyte (1943), Hagedorn (1988), Vigil (1988), Padilla (1992), Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), and Moore (1978, 1991), who spent over two decades studying the “home-boys” of Hispanic barrios all over the country. All these researchers employed a fieldwork approach to the study of gangs rather than the more structured approaches offered by quantitative methods.

Qualitative methods still must rely on operationalizing exactly what it is meant by research constructs. For example, one of the first issues Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were challenged with was precisely defining a gang (recall Chapter 4). After all, the term *gang* could refer to many groups of youth, including high school Debate Society or the Young Republicans. After reviewing the literature, Decker and Van Winkle developed a working definition of a gang as an “age-graded peer group that exhibits some permanence, engages in criminal activity, and has some symbolic representation of membership” (p. 31). To operationalize who was a gang member, they relied on self-identification. “Are you claiming . . . ?” was a key screening question that was also verified, as often as possible, with other gang members.

Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were interested in several questions:

Our study revolved around a number of activities, both gang and nongang related, that our subjects were likely to engage in. First, we were interested in motivations to join gangs, the process of joining the gang, the symbols of gang membership, the strength of associational ties, the structure or hierarchy within the gang, motivations