

VIOLENCE AS THE SACRED:  
GANG STRUCTURES AND VIOLENCE AS A FORM OF SOCIAL (DIS)ORGANIZATION  
AND MEANING-MAKING

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
BACHELOR OF ARTS

In the Honors College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2024

## Acknowledgements

I give my deepest gratitude to Dr. Alejandro Nava for advising me throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, as well as inspiring the main thrust of my argument through his class “Rap, Culture and God”. I could not have undertaken this journey without the continued guidance and inspiration of Margaret Stafford— my best friend and an indelible figure in my academic development. Without her, I would not have had the model or the courage to have become the scholar and person I am today. Finally, I would be remiss not to mention my mother, Tami Maltbie, who talked me through the hardest days and greatest fears I had tackling the intellectual dragon that I molded into this thesis and helped me to push through my self-doubt to complete it.

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# Violence as the Sacred: Gang Structures and Violence as a Form of Social (Dis)Organization and Meaning-Making

The present research considers the influence of structural conditions of poverty, inequality, and historical discrimination on the formation of gang units and the use of violence as a normative means of survival, social organization and meaning-making within gang units. The theoretical contributions and research of Wilson et al and Hawkins et al serve as the foundation for a model describing a cyclical process of gang influence, in which the structural conditions of resource scarce and spatially compressed neighborhoods incentivize dynamics of conflictive ethnocentrism and violence, which are given meaning through social dynamics defined by in-group and out-group relations to violence as a form of social capital, which exacerbates inter-group conflict as affinity groups vie to assert their exclusive claim to violence and worsen structural conditions as a result.

This study argues that the described process possesses religious characteristics, particularly in the consecration of violence among gangs as a value which sets the in-group and individuals associated with the in-group apart from others. The religious theories and approaches of Rene Girard, Emile Durkheim, Jonathan Haidt, and Mircea Eliade clarify the religious character of violence in gang structures and provide an understanding of the role of violence as an example of the totemic principle. The outcome of research determines that violence as the totemic principle creates a social order of gang affiliated “elect” and non-affiliated “laity”, which eventually breaks down as different groups compete and split in the process of expansion and assertion of unique claims to violence.

## Introduction | Race, Cultural Essentialism, and Neighborhood as Place and Space

Historically, gang culture and violence has been culturally essentialized as synonymous with black culture and “cultures of poverty”.<sup>1</sup> This essentialization is both a symptom of American histories of racialization and racial theories as well as classist assumptions of inferiority of the poor based on precepts of rugged individualism and meritocracy within the United States.<sup>2</sup> However, the existence of gang culture and violence within urban America, particularly within predominantly black neighborhoods, is a product of racialized ethnic spatial compression and the creation of perpetual zones of transition within impoverished and disadvantaged communities.<sup>3</sup>

The creation of perpetual zones of transition is based upon Hawkins et al’s zones of transition, which provide spaces within the urban landscape where incoming immigrants and the economically disadvantaged to live and work on meager incomes.<sup>4</sup> These zones of transition originally acted as a temporary place to live and work while the disadvantaged accrued wealth and capital in order to move on to better accommodations within wealthier neighborhoods. However, in the post-Reconstruction era when former slaves began the Great Migration that led many to take up residence in the Northern cities of New England and the Midwest, they began to populate these zones of transition as the most economically and socially accessible spaces for relocation.<sup>5</sup> The increasing black populations within urban areas, concentrated particularly within these zones of transition created conditions in which white hostilities toward blacks fomented into discriminating policies such as redlining that socially isolated black populations and

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 175–77.

<sup>2</sup> Gossett, *Race*, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 91–92; 102–3.

<sup>4</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 100.

<sup>5</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 175,178.

transformed zones of transition into prolonged and permanent places of residence for the disadvantaged.<sup>6</sup>

The discriminatory forces leading to the creation of these perpetual zones of transition are founded upon racial theories of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that essentialized the black population as inherently inferior. Within the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Racial Anthropology introduced a series of racial theories and typologies that essentialized the perceived qualities of each race as a matter of biology.<sup>7</sup> When related to the peoples of Africa and its diaspora, Eurocentric and racist views typified black peoples as infantilized, stupid, savage, and unfit for participation in civilized society.<sup>8</sup> This biological essentialism was considered to be a fact of black peoples very nature, and served to encourage the cultural essentialism of the modern era.

The perceived biological inferiority of black people was used during and after Reconstruction as a justification for the creation of discriminatory social policies that kept black people in a disadvantaged and separated state. The creation of Black Codes, grandfather laws, redlining, and separate but equal policies racially divided black and white Americans along the “color line”.<sup>9</sup> During the post-Reconstruction era as freedmen began to move north, the social sciences likewise began to discredit biological essentialism in favor of theories that considered issues of race from socioeconomic and cultural perspectives. The poor economic and social conditions of black people within urban zones of transition, led social scientists to essentialize black culture along a new “culture line”.<sup>10</sup> This cultural essentialism purported the general potential of black people for social mobility and uplift, yet using the same socioeconomic

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 23–24.

<sup>7</sup> Gossett, *Race*, 35–36; 56–57.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, “Race, Class and Urban Poverty,” 44–45.

<sup>9</sup> Gossett, *Race*, 256,266; 275–76.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 111.

conditions that justified the new theories they incriminated black culture as the cause of black peoples' difficulty in reaching equal socioeconomic footing with their white counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various additional factors worsened conditions in zones of transition and increased their social isolation from mainstream society. White flight due to economic decline and followed the redlined mortgage programs of the post-World War II Federal Housing Administration led to the exit of financially and socially established individuals from urban communities.<sup>12</sup> Often these fleeing white populations would move to the newly constructed suburbs that were specially advertised to white, urban populations seeking to escape the inner city using these mortgage programs. In turn, as white populations took up residence in the suburbs, job opportunities and employment followed behind their fleeing workforce.<sup>13</sup> In tandem with the decline of manufacturing jobs in the Northern United States, these events left the now predominantly black, inner-city communities with few opportunities for gainful employment in mainstream work.<sup>14</sup> Due to diminishing employment opportunities and disappearing social institutions, black residents of the working class who had the means to follow the job market also left inner city neighborhoods in pursuit of work.<sup>15</sup>

The flight of working class black residents from inner city neighborhoods exacerbated the concentration effects of social isolation and joblessness that transformed zones of transition into the perpetual place of residence for disadvantaged.<sup>16</sup> With little to no connection to mainstream work culture or informal social networks that could connect residents to available employment opportunities, disadvantaged populations are left without work or models of behavior necessary

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<sup>11</sup> Muhammad, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 100–101.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, 252.

<sup>16</sup> Young, "Social Isolation, and Concentration Effects," 1075.

for the formal labor market.<sup>17</sup> These effects of concentrated joblessness and structural disadvantage characterize the perpetual zones of transition that form the landscape of gang influenced neighborhoods and communities.

However, the place and space of gang violence is not only defined by the histories of discrimination and poverty which create perpetual zones of transition, but also by the variable boundaries of what defines a neighborhood. In their study of successful youth development in urban neighborhoods, Elliott et al found that when asked to identify the boundaries of a given neighborhood, residents of lower socioeconomic status tended to identify smaller spatial units, such as a block or block group, as the boundary of their neighborhood, while residents of higher socioeconomic status typically identified larger spatial units, block groups or census tracts.<sup>18</sup> At the individual level, subjects tended to identify the boundaries of their neighborhood with their personal residence at approximately the center and when asked about the institutions that served the neighborhood the perceived boundary of the neighborhood tended to expand.<sup>19</sup> This variable quality of the neighborhood as the place and space of gang violence informs the rest of this analysis, as it reflects the shifting social and spatial boundaries of gang structures that lead to inter-group conflict and violence. Gang violence is a product of the social and structural dynamics of impoverished, socially isolated communities as community members form affinity groups, compete for resources, and create and maintain social norms and senses of belonging through post-hoc acts of meaning-making.

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<sup>17</sup> Young, 1075.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott et al., *Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods*, 17,19.

<sup>19</sup> Elliott et al., 17–19.



## Structural Conditions and Structural Dynamics of Violence

### Building a Sense of Place and Space

Successful life outcomes rely on social and structural foundations that are conducive to developing the skill sets, networks, and cultural frames necessary to compete and succeed in mainstream culture and the formal labor market.<sup>20</sup> As such, the neighborhood forms a critical foundation for migrating populations and resident youths in their attempts to participate in society. However, within perpetual zones of transition the capacities for social organization and successful outcomes are stifled by disadvantage and conditions hostile to the development of necessary skill sets and connections for success.<sup>21</sup> Elliott et al provide a set of neighborhood characteristics linked to youth development outcomes and levels of social organization and disorganization, which clarify the role of the neighborhood as a place and space of development.

In their research, Elliott et al identify connections between effective formal institutions, informal promotion and control structures, and normative value consensus to positive youth outcomes.<sup>22</sup> These neighborhood characteristics can be seen in the form of communal participation in institutions serving the community, systems of accountability, neighborhood pride and responsibility, and strong communal ties under a unified sense of identity.<sup>23</sup> Such characteristics are associated with high levels of social organization, which promotes neighborhood resilience against the influence of illicit modeling and opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Illicit modeling and opportunities, related to rates of violent and non-violent crime, petty theft, vandalism, and illegal economies via drug dealing, have a negative effect on youth outcomes and promote social disorganization.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Young, "Social Isolation, and Concentration Effects," 1075.

<sup>21</sup> Elliott et al., *Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods*, 145–47.

<sup>22</sup> Elliott et al., 123–25.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson and Taub, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, 166–69.

<sup>24</sup> Elliott et al., *Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods*, 104–5.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 21.

Disadvantaged neighborhoods, who are prone to higher rates of social dislocations and joblessness, have the capacity to develop average or good levels of social organization, but these outcomes are atypical.<sup>26</sup>

Though atypical, these effects can be seen in levels of social organization described by prior residents of the Cabrini-Green, a former housing project in Chicago. Dolores Wilson describes her role as a community organizer and city worker at the housing project, recalling a strong sense of community in her neighborhood.<sup>27</sup> She also describes community resilience to gang violence through formal institutions, with the involvement of local police to protect the neighborhoods informal drum and bugle corps from shootings that had taken place in the area.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the decent levels of social organization within her community, Dolores also remembers the creation of “nameless gangs” among the youth of Cabrini-Green as a form of protection from an ever-encroaching presence of gangs from surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>29</sup> This reflects the issues that disadvantaged residents of the inner-city face, as communities that are proximal to contiguous ghettos experiencing violence have a tendency to experience heightened rates of violence as a result.<sup>30</sup> Such a case is not necessarily as influential in inner-city communities which have higher rates of wealth and homeownership as in the case of Groveland, a black community in the central city of Chicago which has a very strong sense of community and high levels of social organization.<sup>31</sup> Though the community is more resilient than Cabrini-

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<sup>26</sup> Elliott et al., *Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods*, 145–47.

<sup>27</sup> Petty et al., *High Rise Stories*, 22–23.

<sup>28</sup> Petty et al., 24.

<sup>29</sup> Petty et al., 25–26.

<sup>30</sup> Sampson, Wilson, and Katz, “REASSESSING ‘TOWARD A THEORY OF RACE, CRIME, AND URBAN INEQUALITY,’” 23.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson and Taub, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, 174–77.

Green, it's residents still feel the effects of the surrounding disadvantaged neighborhoods of the South Side and hold concerns for the future of the community.<sup>32</sup>

The success of communities is not, however, solely related to level of internal social connections and senses of attachment, but also heavily relies on connections to external institutions and formal employment cultures.<sup>33</sup> The role of positive modeling of behaviors conducive to maintaining a traditional job is integral for the development of communal attitudes toward work, and connections to gainfully employed neighbors allows residents to gain access to informal job networks.<sup>34</sup> In the case of perpetual zones of transition, widespread access to gainful employment and formal institutions is limited due to social isolation and hypersegregation cause by American Apartheid.<sup>35</sup> The process of redlining and discriminatory policies against African Americans and other minorities in the United States has had a profound effect on said groups' communal development, limiting opportunities of the poor and working class to employment accessible to the central city.<sup>36</sup> Due to shifts from producing goods to services, labor market polarization, and outflow of manufacturing jobs,<sup>37</sup> many residents of perpetual zones of transition are left without readily available entry level jobs due to long commutes to the suburbs and reliance on public transportation.<sup>38</sup>

Without good models for mainstream values and a lack of access to functional labor and social systems, youths of these communities experience difficulties maintaining stable social memberships and participating in society, all of which are marked by Wilhelm Heitmeyer as

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<sup>32</sup> Wilson and Taub, 157–59.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, "Why Both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty," 201.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 74–75; 78.

<sup>35</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 102–3.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 223–24.

necessary for the full social integration of youths.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he describes how residential segregation and social disintegration threaten the necessary foundations for positive social development and open up the space for ambivalence.<sup>40</sup> Ambivalence causes youths to devalue pre-existing structures and pathways for socialization and creating a life path, causing decreased predictability and increased pressure on youths.<sup>41</sup> This ambivalence also opens youths to the possibility of engaging in illicit opportunities in environments of widespread joblessness.

The concentration effects of widespread joblessness are tied to social dislocations, including violent crime, and persistent poverty.<sup>42</sup> Various residents of the Chicago housing projects describe their relationship with social dislocations and the accidental cultural transmission<sup>43</sup> of reduced feelings of self-efficacy and behaviors alternative to mainstream job market success.<sup>44</sup> Donnell Furlow, a former resident of Rockwell Gardens, describes early exposure to firearms and drug use, which lead to later involvement in gang violence and drug dealing within his community.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, Dawn Knight of Robert Taylor Homes recalls the widespread abuse of alcohol and hard drugs among both youths and adults within her community.<sup>46</sup> Not only do these conditions negatively influence personal and community outcomes through perpetuating illicit modeling, but they also encourage perceptions of scarcity in relation to traditional opportunities in life and work.

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<sup>39</sup> Tienda and Wilson, *Youth in Cities*, 90.

<sup>40</sup> Tienda and Wilson, 93–96.

<sup>41</sup> Tienda and Wilson, 91.

<sup>42</sup> Young, “Social Isolation, and Concentration Effects,” 1075.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> Sampson, Wilson, and Katz, “REASSESSING ‘TOWARD A THEORY OF RACE, CRIME, AND URBAN INEQUALITY,’” 16.

<sup>45</sup> Petty et al., *High Rise Stories*, 39–40.

<sup>46</sup> Petty et al., 31.

### Firm Boundaries Without, Transient Boundaries Within

Absolute and relative deprivation, real and perceived scarcity, is described by Hawkins et al as a strong driver of competitive acquisitiveness and affinity group formation.<sup>47</sup> The perception of scarce communal resources in terms of turf and financial opportunities promotes competition between individuals and groups for said resources. In order to better access and procure these resources, individuals form affinity groupings along lines of culture and kinship bonds.<sup>48</sup> These bonds are formed through a process of ethnocentrism, in which populations that share common histories and cultures associate with each other and define themselves in relation to out-groups.<sup>49</sup> Within disadvantaged African American communities in perpetual zones of transition, the ethnic heterogeneity that allows for multiple affinity groups to form derives from ancestral ties to Africa and the retention of culture, as well as the influences of cultures on slaves post-Reconstruction as they migrated across the South and eventually made their way to Northern cities during the great migration.<sup>50</sup>

In circumstances where resources are scarce and boundaries are ill-defined, Groups develop ethnocentric tendencies as a means of self-preservation in the face of collective violence. As affinity groups form, the necessity to define the boundaries of in-group and out-group, protect oneself and kin from out-group violence, and procure resources leads to the development of conflictive ethnocentric tendencies.<sup>51</sup> Within affinity groups influenced by conflictive ethnocentrism, young men act as foot soldiers to mete out conflict and protect the interests of the

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<sup>47</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 106.

<sup>48</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 87.

<sup>49</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 85.

<sup>50</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 101–2; 170–71.

<sup>51</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 89.

group according to Hawkins et al.<sup>52</sup> Through their affiliation with the in-group, these individual members and foot soldiers are able to achieve self-preservation through elevated levels of protection and capacities for resource acquisition as a result of collective efforts.<sup>53</sup> As violence escalates and boundaries become more defined, social cohesion increases and becomes more necessary as remaining unaffiliated individuals seek affinity group ties.

Despite increasingly defined boundaries within perpetual zones of transition, the strong influence of social isolation maintains the outer boundaries of these communities and places competing affinity groups in circumstances where there is no potential for further retreat.<sup>54</sup> The inability of affinity groups to retreat causes overlapping of territories between groups, which is compounded by transient and variable definitions of neighborhood boundaries. These conditions lead to conditions of perpetual conflict and gang violence as groups compete for limited territory and attempt to retreat in spatially compressed environments.<sup>55</sup> As such, violence becomes the necessary means of survival for affinity groups within zones of perpetual transition, forming the foundation for the creation and perpetuation of gang structures.<sup>56</sup>

Violence as a structural means of survival and protection against threats of scarcity and out-group violence acts as the theoretical foundation for the model of this study. At the individual level, preexisting structural conditions cause individuals to compete for and attempt to procure resources through competitive acquisitiveness. Due to the insufficient capacities of a lone individual and ethnocentric tendencies exacerbated by ethnic spatial compression of heterogeneous groups,<sup>57</sup> individuals from affinity groups which participate in conflictive

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<sup>52</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 89–90.

<sup>55</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 106.

<sup>56</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 107–8.

<sup>57</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 93.

ethnocentrism and collective violence as a means of obtaining necessities and self-preservation. At the group level, violence persists when affinity groups are unable to retreat from conflict and serves as a means to define in-group outgroup boundaries. Through boundary definition, affinity groups strengthen social cohesion through forming a unified group identity. These structural dynamics of violence at the individual and group level, once established, then translate in to the social and cultural sphere through acts of meaning-making around the central function of violence.<sup>58</sup> The social dynamics of violence identified through a religious studies approach will then form the secondary part of the model.

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<sup>58</sup> Wilson, "Why Both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty," 202.

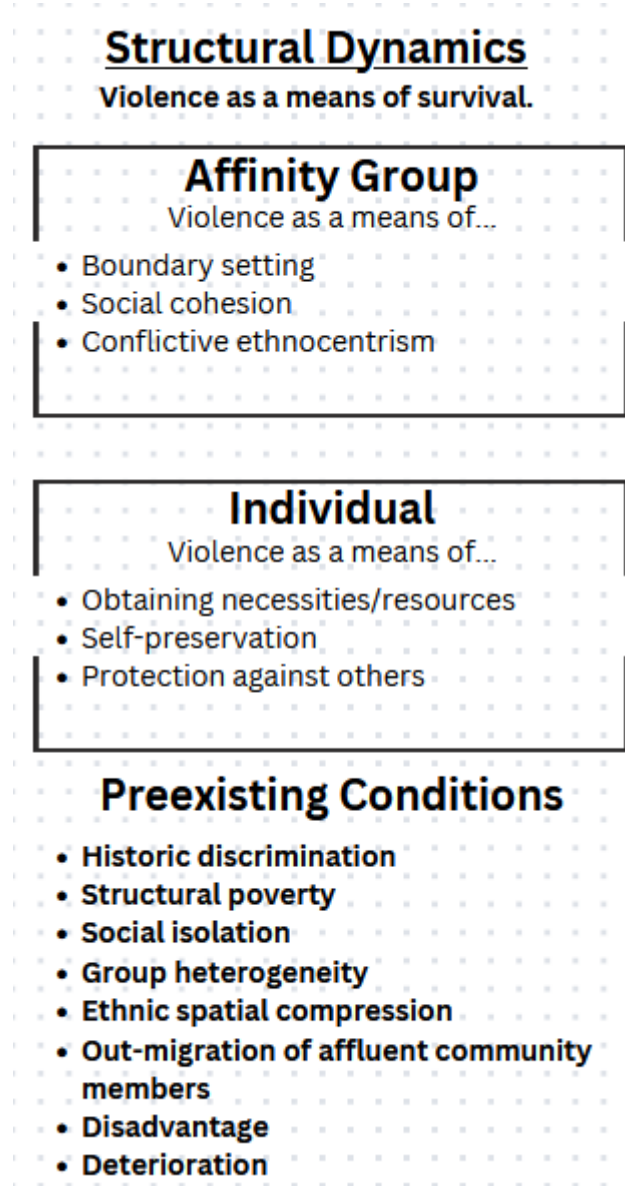


Figure A. Model of structural dynamics related to violence in nascent and existing gang structures. Preexisting structural conditions influenced by histories of discrimination and poverty incentivize group formation and maintenance through and as a result of conflict as a means of survival. Violence acts as a tool for defining boundaries between in-group and out-group, and allows individuals to form associations that can acquire greater protections and resources than individuals alone.



### **The Totemic Principle and Violence as the Sacred | Violence as the Sacrificial Act**

Within Jonathan Haidt’s theory of “the intuitive dog and its rational tail”, a model is presented where people make moral or emotional judgements first, then formulate their reasoning to justify their initial reaction.<sup>59</sup> This post-hoc reasoning acts as the means to justify the individual’s relatively immediate judgement of whether something is right or wrong. In the context of gang structures, violence is used as a means to obtain resources and maintain social cohesion and boundaries in response to pressures of scarcity and conflictive ethnocentrism. In gang structures, the violent act is socially reinforced as the right way to engage in inter-group conflict via these ethnocentric tendencies and becomes a social value and currency through post-hoc justifications.<sup>60</sup> Within this social dynamic wherein violence exists as a key social value and currency associated with survival and group identity, it also becomes the core principle of meaning-making, maintaining norms, and affirming senses of belonging within the gang structure.<sup>61</sup> Through this post-hoc justification of violence as a social value, the structural dynamics of gang structures are reconfigured and given social context and meaning. This act of meaning-making forms the theoretical foundation for understanding the social dynamics of gangs through the lens of religious theory.

As the primary social value of the gang structure, violence functions similarly to Emile Durkheim’s totemic principle.<sup>62</sup> Violence as the totemic principle becomes an object of the sacred, and all things related to it in the social context become a social expression of the sacred or profane.<sup>63</sup> Violence constitutes the ethos of the gang structure and its functions reflected by Durkheim’s assertion that, “[t]he god of the clan, the totemic principle, can. . . be nothing else

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<sup>59</sup> Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 58–59.

<sup>60</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 254–55.

<sup>61</sup> Girard, 92.

<sup>62</sup> Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 95.

<sup>63</sup> Girard, 32.

than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination. . .”<sup>64</sup> Those within the gang structure who engage in violence dissolve their profane selves absent of the ritualistic, sacrificial use of violence and are imbued with the sacred principle that affirms their belonging to the “clan”.<sup>65</sup> Those outside of the gang structure are denied the right to violence, and either obey the social norms asserted by the gang structure or transgress against the social taboos restricting violence.<sup>66</sup>

The act of violence also functions as an expression of the sacrificial relationship in which the gang functioning as an elect group is sacralized through the sacrifice of a victim.<sup>67</sup> Through their participation in the sacrificial act, the victims of violence become an equally significant aspect of the realization of the sacred as a conduit through which violence can take place.<sup>68</sup> The victims of this sacrificial relationship typically consist of members of rival gangs, who transgress the elect’s monopoly on violence through their own illegitimate use of violence against the gang structure.<sup>69</sup> However, the role of victim can also be ascribed to those otherwise profane members of the community who transgress the norms of gang structures and trespass into the sacred space exclusive to the elect. It is through this sacrificial relationship that the gang and its members affirm their sacred relationship to the totemic principle by acting as the instrument through which violence is brought into being via the sacrifice.<sup>70</sup> As an act of sacrifice, the act of violence becomes a “symbolic[] expression[] of social realities.”<sup>71</sup>

At the group level, the gang structure as the clan forms the essence of the totemic principle. As the clan, the elect become the highest principle of the social hierarchy. The act of

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<sup>64</sup> Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 95–96.

<sup>65</sup> Pals, 96.

<sup>66</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 231.

<sup>67</sup> Girard, 162–63.

<sup>68</sup> Girard, 1,8.

<sup>69</sup> Girard, 25.

<sup>70</sup> Girard, 280.

<sup>71</sup> Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 100.

violence as a core aspect of gang life and culture is sublimated within the group identity of the gang and becomes synonymous with it.<sup>72</sup> Within gang culture, this value is associated with the term “hard” in which those who are “hard” have a high propensity and ability to perform violent acts and embody other qualities valued by the gang structure. The ability to enact violence becomes a symbol of the gang member’s sense of belonging within the gang as its exclusive right.<sup>73</sup> Affiliation with the elect allows the individual gang member to enact violence without transgressing social taboos, and this act is the quality affirms one’s “hardness”. As such, the monopoly on violence not only is the qualifying feature of the gang, but also acts as a self-affirming value of the collective.

At the individual level violent acts affirm the individual’s relationship with the greater gang structure and connects them directly to the totemic principle. In this sense, the individual gang member engaging in violence could be understood both as a part of the clan of the totemic principle as well as the god. This can be further explained by Mircea Eliade’s concepts of hierophany and theophany. A hierophany is an appearance of the sacred, with theophany being the explicit appearance of a deity.<sup>74</sup> With this context in mind, the act of violence is an example of hierophany as appearance of the sacred through its own virtue as the totemic principle. This totemic principle is sublimated within the gang member during the violent act and as a result the gang member is imbued with sacrality. This embodiment of the sacred could be considered a theophany, typically in which violence is meted out as divine retribution by the elect for the transgression of social taboo.<sup>75</sup> This momentary deification reflects the realization of the idea of

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<sup>72</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 100,232.

<sup>73</sup> Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 91,96.

<sup>74</sup> Pals, 235.

<sup>75</sup> Pals, 245.

being “real”.<sup>76</sup> The individual is “real” as they are able to back up their claims as to their ability to perform violence, both by word of mouth and by virtue of affiliation with the gang structure, and affirm their alignment with the general quality of the gang structure as being “hard”. The gang as matter of structure is “hard”, and the affirmation of a gang member’s relationship to the gang through being “real” aligns them to its qualities.

As a function of ethnocentric tendencies, violence also acts as a means of maintaining norms. The necessity to identify the in-group and out-group within conflictive ethnocentrism creates a social order in gang structures which is related both to group and community affiliation.<sup>77</sup> The elect hold a monopoly on violence within their communities, and those outside of this elect group within the community form a sort of laity under the control and protection of the elect. This laity comprises the profane class within the social structure of the gang, from which the laity is subject to informal codes of conduct and a general taboo against violence created by the gang structure, yet are generally kept out of direct conflict between gang structures.<sup>78</sup> Norms within gang influenced communities generally center around issues of non-interference with the illicit and non-illicit activities of the gang, whether that be through informal social structures, or involvement of outside forces. The enforcement of norms and taboos by the elect on the profane laity is maintained through the threat of violence.<sup>79</sup> Those individuals identified as outsiders to the gang structure and the community, particularly those identified with rival gangs, transgress the spatial and social boundaries of the gang structure established through its monopoly on violence. These individuals invade and conceptually threaten the normative

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<sup>76</sup> Metcalf, *The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Street Gang Memoirs*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 89.

<sup>78</sup> Wilson, *More than Just Race*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Wilson and Chaddha, “The Role of Theory in Ethnographic Research,” 552.

space of the gang's community, and those that engage in violence themselves pollute the totemic principle against the elect.

From these features of the conceptual space of gang violence arises a model for the social dynamics relating to and building upon the model of structural dynamics. Violence as the means of survival within the structural model becomes associated with violence as a social value in the social model and operates as a means of meaning-making. The affinity group as the central structure through which survival is obtained through resource acquisition is given new meaning via violence as a social value. The necessity of social cohesion is translated into the social sphere as a sense of belonging amongst gang members and is achieved through alignment of the group as a whole to its propensity for violence. This alignment with violence extends to the individual level, as individuals engage in violence both as a means of acquiring resources and upholding group interests as well as an act of self-affirmation that they uphold the violent qualities of the group. Through the individuals affiliation with the gang structure, they obtain the social right to enact violence for the reasons previously stated but also to maintain norms and taboos regarding the use of violence and resources. This use of violence as an exclusive tool of acquisition and enforcement sets gang affiliated individuals apart from non-affiliated members of the community and prescribes those community members a lower class in relation to the gang structure.

In the social dynamics of gang culture, violence becomes the totemic principle through post-hoc acts of meaning-making, which makes it both the means of creating value and a value in of itself within gang culture. Violence, the gang, and the gang member are all made into a central value of the social structure of gang influenced communities, through the synonymous nature of the totemic principle, clan, and god as a function of the sacrificial act. This value structure is maintained through norms and taboos that keep the use of violence "set apart and

forbidden” from profane out-group members, making violence the lone, permissible quality of the gang.<sup>80</sup> The social structure at the core of this process of meaning-making acts as the primary attempt of gang structures to create social organization through illicit opportunities and modeling, which perpetuate the cycle of violence.

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<sup>80</sup> Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 91.

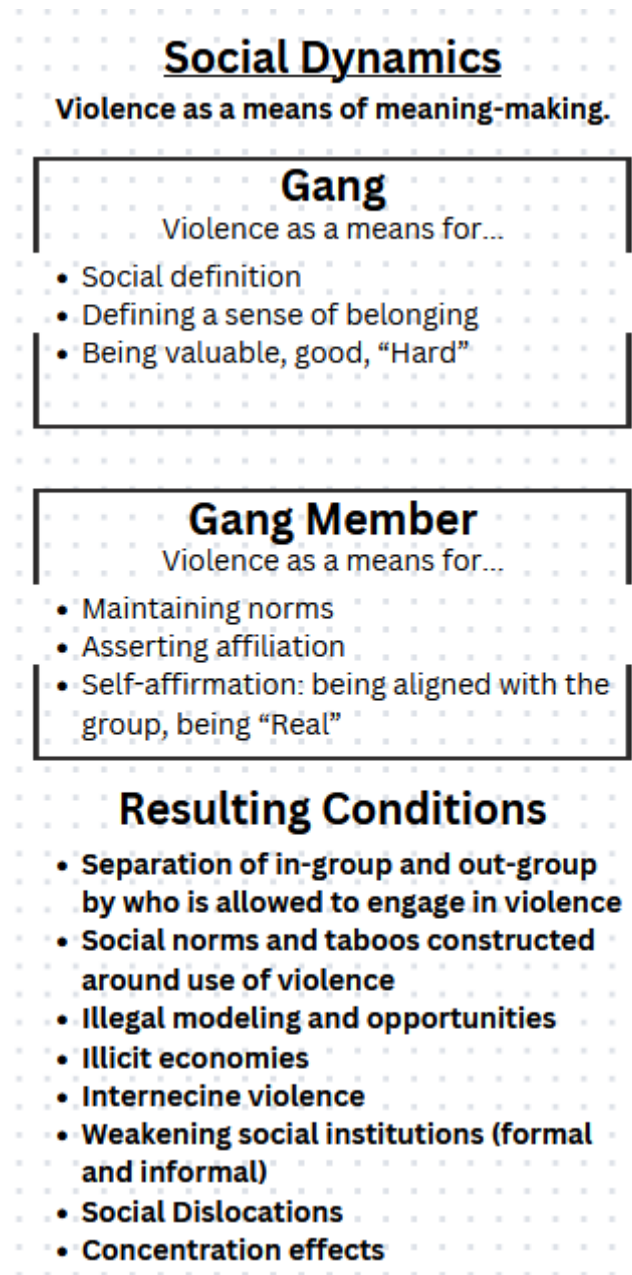


Figure B. Model of social dynamics related to violence in gang structures. Violence acts as a means of meaning-making and social capital, giving group identities and affiliations social value and power. Results in worsening community conditions and social disorganization.

### The Phenomenology of Gang Violence | The Reality of “Realness”

The theoretical approaches of Clifford Geertz provide a foundation for understanding gang violence and culture through religious theory that expands beyond the limits of values and norms. Within his approach, Geertz identifies that worldviews and systems of meaning provide a basis for understanding behavior “that is distinct from other cultural attributes”.<sup>81</sup> By understanding the worldviews and cultural frames through which the members of disadvantaged and gang influenced communities understand their social context, the role of violence as a social value can be contextualized within the broader phenomenology of gang culture.<sup>82</sup> This relates to Geertz’s concept of thick description, wherein the religious behaviors of a group should be understood in terms of what the members of the group actually intend by their actions, rather than describe their actions alone.<sup>83</sup> Violence does not exist in the lives of gang members and the members of their communities as a worldview or cultural frame in of itself; Rather, violence acts as significant social tool for constructing social value and maintaining norms that exists within a greater cultural context of meaning.<sup>84</sup>

The youth of disadvantaged neighborhoods are often isolated from mainstream cultures and models of behavior and exist within social contexts characterized by acute joblessness and a lack of formal and informal social institutions.<sup>85</sup> These conditions exacerbate the prevalence of social dislocations that negatively affect youth outcomes in the form of violent and non-violent crime, births out-of-wedlock, welfare dependency, and family dissolution.<sup>86</sup> Concentrated joblessness also results in large amounts of free time in which youths can be exposed to cultural

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<sup>81</sup> Young, “Social Isolation, and Concentration Effects,” 1078.

<sup>82</sup> Young, 1079.

<sup>83</sup> Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 299–300.

<sup>84</sup> Wilson, “Why Both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty,” 203–4.

<sup>85</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 52–53.

<sup>86</sup> Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 49,143.



frames that promote violence as a value and modeling of illicit activities such as substance use and drug dealing.<sup>87</sup> The susceptibility of youths to engage in illicit economic opportunities in an attempt to improve their personal financial situation can lead to a dependence on said opportunities to maintain lifestyles and livelihoods, as well as an increase in exposure to informal networks and groups that engage in illegal activities.<sup>88</sup> These surroundings influence the creation of normative codes and cultural frames wherein crime, violence and poverty are recognized as a part of community members' day-to-day lives.<sup>89</sup>

The draw of drug dealing as a means of accruing wealth and maintaining a defined social role within a disadvantaged community leads youths into social roles that further desensitize them to the harmful effects of substance use.<sup>90</sup> Through these harmful effects, such as addiction or negative side effects, drug dealing acts as an indirect form of violence perpetrated by the dealer against their clientele. Individuals who sell drugs are aware of these effects and take advantage of them to encourage continual drug use by addicts and maintain the cashflow that supports their continued survival and elevated financial status within their community. Relating to violence as the sacred, the relationship between the drug dealer and drug addict mirrors the sacrificial relationship between the sacrificer and the sacrificed, though in this case the elevation of the individual is of a financial nature.<sup>91</sup> The economic incentive to engage in and take advantage of indirect forms of harm can serve to desensitize those who engage in drug dealing to more direct forms of violence.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Wilson, "Why Both Social Structure and Culture Matter in a Holistic Analysis of Inner-City Poverty," 202,204,206.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 57–59.

<sup>89</sup> Sampson, Wilson, and Katz, "REASSESSING 'TOWARD A THEORY OF RACE, CRIME, AND URBAN INEQUALITY,'" 16.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 9–10.

<sup>91</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 280–81.

<sup>92</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 21.

As young members of disadvantaged communities engage in illicit economic opportunities like drug dealing and property theft, they become involved in social networks and gang structures engaged in violent conflict.<sup>93</sup> As drug dealing becomes the most visible and accessible form of economic opportunity within a disadvantage community, the value of territory within the community increases as drug dealers and their social networks begin to engage in conflictive ethnocentrism to define the boundaries of their turf.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, the revenue accrued through drug dealing allows gang members to purchase firearms and other weapons which increase the lethality of group conflicts.<sup>95</sup> As turf becomes increasingly contested and the nature of violent conflict grows more lethal, definitions of social and spatial boundaries become more well defined and disadvantaged communities are partitioned into the respective territories of gang structures. The growing threat of violence solidifies informal codes of conduct amongst non-gang affiliated community members to protect themselves and reinforces expectations of violence and crime as a regular part of life.

Through the creation of escalating violent conflicts and defined gang territories and neighborhood boundaries, gangs subject members of the community to conditions that intensify the effects of social isolation and ethnic spatial compression through limiting movement and activity within and without gang-influenced areas.<sup>96</sup> Such conditions limit the associations and movement of community members as they are incentivized to remain within the defined boundaries of the dominant gang structure and minimize opportunities in which they can be misconstrued as an outsider.<sup>97</sup> These informal codes of conduct are reinforced by the behaviors of gang structures, which persecute those who “step out of line” with violence and benefit those

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<sup>93</sup> Wilson, 21–22.

<sup>94</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 89.

<sup>95</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 60–61.

<sup>96</sup> Petty et al., *High Rise Stories*, 31.

<sup>97</sup> Petty et al., 40.

who remain within their prescribed role with protection from violent actors outside the dominant gang structure.<sup>98</sup> As legitimate opportunities for work in the formal job market become increasingly constricted and difficult to obtain due to lack of physical and social mobility,<sup>99</sup> the chances of internecine violence increase as affinity groups trapped within the artificial boundaries of gang structures participate in illicit opportunities incentivizing them to join ethnocentric conflicts for their own interests.<sup>100</sup> The proliferation of new gang structures and factionalism within existing gang structures increases competition and conflict over turf within disadvantaged communities and decreases the ability of any given affinity group to retreat from areas of conflict.

### **Cycles of Violence and the Gang as a Force for Social Disorganization**

Gang structures promote cycles of violence because of their propensity to maintain violent conflicts and the indirect violence of drug dealing within disadvantaged communities. The inability of affinity groups within and without gang structures to retreat from contested territory creates perpetual conflicts which are aggravated by competitive acquisitiveness and ill-defined spatial boundaries.<sup>101</sup> Attempts at expansion through competitive acquisitiveness are encouraged by the social and structural dynamics of gangs and the economic incentives of illicit opportunities like drug dealing, which promote the gang structure as the prime interest for resource acquisition.<sup>102</sup> Through this competitive acquisitiveness, gangs remain in perpetual states of violence which maintain and exacerbate structural conditions causing social isolation

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<sup>98</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 24.

<sup>99</sup> Elliott et al., *Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods*, 48.

<sup>100</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 90.

<sup>101</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 89–90.

<sup>102</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 106,115.

and disorganization. The following is a theoretical conceptualization of this process based upon the preceding research and theoretical contributions of Hawkins et al.

The modeling of violence and illicit opportunities within gang influenced communities leads to internecine violence, as members of alternative ethnocentric affinity groups within gang structures and the neighborhoods they inhabit take up the same behaviors of gang structures for their own interests.<sup>103</sup> These new factions within gang influenced communities then join the competition over resources and turf, degrading preexisting structures. The absorption of alternative affinity groups into gang structures, which lead to factionalism and a breakdown of the gang structure, comes as a result of the expansion of gang structures into new territories through competitive acquisitiveness. Residents of new neighborhoods and territories who join preexisting gang structures to receive their benefits form factions of separate affinity groups within the gang structure. By acquiring resources, weapons and notoriety, affinity groups absorbed through territorial expansion are able to fragment from the gang structure and engage in conflictive ethnocentrism as a separate structure. The breakdown of gang structures into factionalism and ‘gangs without no names’ leads to a general degradation of social structure and the social boundaries which define more organized gang structures.<sup>104</sup>

This breakdown of social structure and boundary setting confounds the ability of individuals engaging in conflict to identify members of rival gangs and the unaffiliated community. This leads to violence that is increasingly wanton, as conflicts shift from violence as a means of boundary setting and resource acquisition to violence as a means of neutralizing the potential threat of unidentified persons. The consequences of this shift include increasing suspicion and violence toward those perceived as outsiders or unfamiliar and the near complete

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<sup>103</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, 90,94.

<sup>104</sup> Petty et al., *High Rise Stories*, 24–25.

breakdown of what few informal social networks and structures that may have been present in a community due to the dissolution of norms that protect unaffiliated community members from gang violence. The inability to engage in basic functions of a community without being perceived as a potential threat leads to aggravation of social isolation and a compounding of concentration effects. At the internecine stage, community members become even more alienated from participating in mainstream culture and conventional opportunities, and surrounding neighborhoods begin to be negatively influenced.<sup>105</sup>

The result of gang violence in socially isolated and ethnic spatially compressed communities is the creation of self-perpetuating conditions of disadvantage which cannot be rectified by those within the community without outside assistance or support.<sup>106</sup> The gang as a social structure undermines traditional social institutions that bring order to communities and exacerbates the structural conditions that keep impoverished communities disadvantaged. The long-term effects of gang violence create conditions where residents have neither the means, skills, nor social networks to engage in the mainstream opportunities that would allow them to exit zones of perpetual conflict or bring economic opportunity to the neighborhood. In their place, youths are exposed to skill sets and social norms that normalize violence as a viable way of life.<sup>107</sup> Cycles of violence in these communities also deter outsiders with economic means from relocating to gang influenced communities, leaving little opportunity to improve structural conditions from within. Through cultural essentialism, the conditions of perpetual zones of transition act as a justification for voters and government entities to withhold economic support and social programs under the pretense that they can be better used elsewhere. Without social

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<sup>105</sup> Sampson, Wilson, and Katz, "REASSESSING 'TOWARD A THEORY OF RACE, CRIME, AND URBAN INEQUALITY,'" 23.

<sup>106</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 224–26.

<sup>107</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 72.

policy and intervention programs, these conditions persist indefinitely as conditions worsen and social structures and engagement disappear within disadvantaged communities.<sup>108</sup>

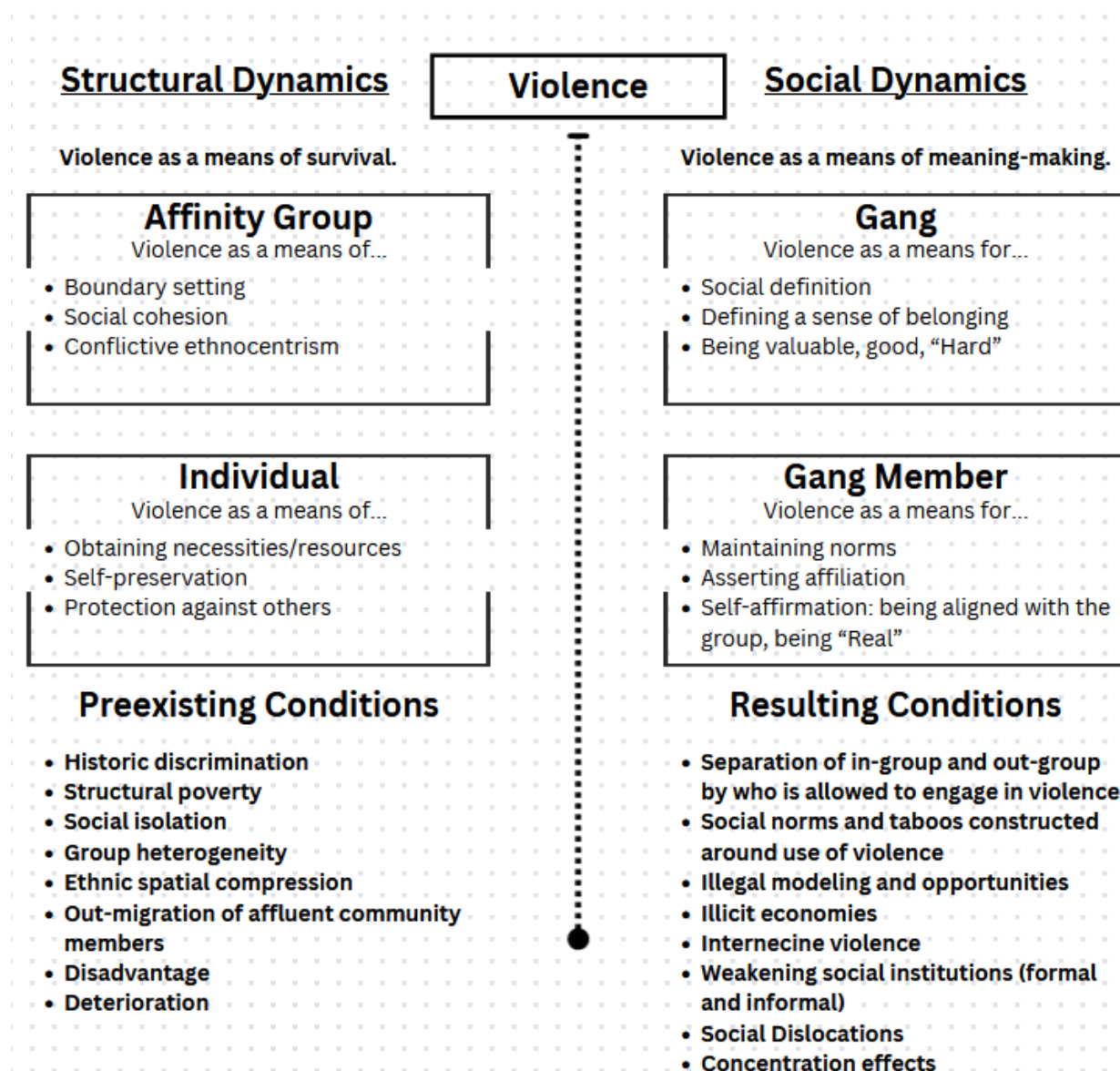


Figure C. Complete model showing the relationship between violence and its social and structural dynamics within gangs and gang influenced communities. Resulting conditions create new social conditions as well as compounding structural conditions, creating social disorganization and potentially perpetuating cycles of violence.

<sup>108</sup> Wilson, *More than Just Race*, 117–19.

## **Conclusion | Reform, Social Policy, and the Gang as a Force for Social Organization**

Despite gang structures' negative influence on social organization and promotion of processes that perpetuate disadvantage and deterioration, they are ultimately attempts at social organization by members of the community for personal and group benefit.<sup>109</sup> The effort and systems of social relations that gang members put into formation and maintenance of gang structures have potential for use in opportunities such as community intervention and prevention programs. The use of public health models to prevent and minimize youth violence have shown promise, with some models directly involving youths in the process of intervening and deescalating potential conflicts.<sup>110</sup> Programs such as Homeboy Industries have also shown success, providing former gang members, both youths and adults, the opportunity to reform their social roles and engage in meaningful work that supports their communities.<sup>111</sup> In light of the positive impact of such programs, this study supports the creation of social policies which provide the means to engage in social institutions and opportunities for uplift within disadvantaged communities, particularly those influenced by gang structures. However, this study also proposes the creation of social institutions and programs that seek to reform gang structures, alongside their members, as a force for positive, productive social organization. It is the author's hope that further research on the structures and social dynamics of gangs will create greater understanding of the potential utility and positive impact that reformed gang structures can have on communities.

While programs for community intervention and gang reform present promise as a means to assist communities at the individual level, it is important to note that if the structural conditions promoting competitive acquisitiveness and gang violence are not remedied then these

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<sup>109</sup> Hawkins, McKean, and White, *Roots of African American Violence*, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Tienda and Wilson, *Youth in Cities*, 183–87.

<sup>111</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 12–14.

cycles continue to perpetuate themselves. A dual model of broad social and economic policy to support disadvantaged communities as well as particular programs to assist those communities affected by legacies of historical discrimination would be instrumental in redress of the issues outlined within this study. In the view of the author, the dual employment of programs targeting structural factors and programs targeting social factors will serve to remediate social and structural ills in a manner that promotes both immediate, case-by-case improvements as well as long term social trends and structural outcomes.



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