

ETHNOGRAPHY WORKING GROUP DRAFT PROTOCOL

This represents our working agreement concerning the minimum effort made by ethnographers in each site regarding (1) methods and (2) topics to be addressed, in order to develop systematic, comparative youth gang case studies across sites.

The strength of research in the ethnographic tradition is its flexibility. This flexibility is necessary, as research in practice may bring up unexpected obstacles and unforeseen topical imperatives. But also, cross-gang and cross-site comparisons will be greatly facilitated by including a set of required or strongly recommended components. The following delineates coverage that should be aimed for in order to provide a systematic analysis for comparative purposes.

METHODS

(1) Location of Gangs

Each research team should begin by gathering broader practical information with regard to gangs in the city/neighborhood of interest to determine whether it will make a useful site for the research. Ideally, the professional surveys and other research from the Eurogang Program will provide a resource to draw upon. In order to ensure that the group under consideration for investigation meets the definitional criteria established by the Eurogang Program, the nominal definition agreed upon by the Definition Working Group should be consulted, and the appropriate measurement option incorporated. This definition reads as follows:

ANY DURABLE, STREET-ORIENTED YOUTH GROUP WHOSE INVOLVEMENT IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITY IS PART OF THEIR GROUP IDENTITY. “*Durability*” means several months or more and refers to the group, which continues despite turnover of members. “*Street-oriented*” means spending a lot of group time outside home, work and school – often on streets, in malls, in parks, in cars, and so on. “*Youth*” refers to average ages in adolescence or early twenties or so. “*Illegal activity*” generally means delinquent or criminal behavior, not just bothersome activity. “*Identity*” refers to the group, not individual self-image; at minimum it includes acceptance of participation in illegal activities by group members.

In addition to drawing from research available through the Eurogang Program, the researcher(s) are encouraged to talk with youth workers, police and other community members to help identify one or several gangs for study. Some of these individuals (though most likely not the police) may also be useful for gaining entrée.

Because ethnographic data can only be gathered when researchers are able to get close to gang participants, gain rapport and garner trust, cooperation from gang members is not simply a given.

Given the unpredictable nature of the fieldwork enterprise, time is of the essence. Thus ethnographers are strongly encouraged to begin fieldwork at the inception of a given project, rather than postponing until other data are collected. Ethnographers also are strongly encouraged to work in tandem with other researchers in the Eurogang Program (or, if this is not possible in your community, to incorporate other facets of the Eurogang multi-method approach—professional surveys/interviews; city/neighborhood level; archival research) in order to ensure that the ethnographic project is embedded in other data collection.

(2) Entrée

There are several ways by which researcher(s) can gain entrée into the field. The decision on how to proceed should be left to the discretion of the individual researcher upon evaluating the local situation. These include such methods as: (a) obtaining introductions from youth workers (e.g., “borrowing” the trust they have pre-established with gang members); (b) identifying a key informant who is a central figure to the gang (e.g. a leader), who can provide access to other gang members; and (c) locating a geographic spot where gang members hang out and spending time there as a means of becoming familiar. Contacting gang members through the police or having open contact with the police during fieldwork is likely to have negative effects and seriously diminish the researcher(s) ability to secure trust and establish rapport.

Gang researchers have often found that it is particularly useful to engage a well-known member of the field site and ask him/her for assistance. This may require paying him/her. If you choose this approach, be sure to specify clearly and precisely your data collection requirements and be sure the field assistant provides you with the correct people to interview. A good field assistant needs training in research procedures, and in a short project this may mean spending a few hours explaining in detail what you need and why. Spend time when possible hanging out with the field assistant to get a sense of the routine activities of individuals in the field site, and to ensure that the field assistant is sufficiently positioned within the group to provide you with needed access. This approach will be particularly useful when there are time limitations in the field.

(3) Time in the Field

Under ideal conditions, each ethnographer or research team should plan to spend six months or more in the field, engaging in observational work, informal and semi-structured interviewing (see below for more details on methods). Ideally, the researcher(s) will employ snowball sampling techniques as a means of building an initial sample, and then move to purposive/theoretical sampling to ensure representative coverage.

Particularly when time limitations exist, the researcher(s) should assess which data require fieldwork (as compared to data available from other facets of the Eurogang Project), and prioritize collection of these data. This will require purposive sampling—making careful decisions about sampling criteria in order to interview those individuals from whom these data are most available. In the case of a limited timeframe for fieldwork, sampling should be strategically planned from the beginning to provide sufficient representativeness of participants (i.e., age, race/ethnicity, gender, crime involvement, etc.).

(4) Data Collection

Ideally, the data collection effort for each youth gang case study would involve the following: (a) participant observation; (b) semi-structured interviews with gang members; (c) the examination of key events; (d) interviews with non-gang community members. Additional data collection techniques may be used to supplement the above-mentioned, at the discretion of the researcher(s).

- (a) *Participant Observation* – This will involve spending time with gang members, observing their activities, and gathering information based on informal conversations. The researcher(s) will gather interactional data, i.e., data concerning the exchange of values, behavior, verbal exchanges and exchanges of other material means between members in the group and between groups, as well as group and group member interactions with key neighborhood/community institutions (police, family, schools, service providers, etc.). Keep detailed fieldnotes from each observational session, including a detailed description of the scene, events, and conversations.
- (b) *Semi-Structured Interviews* – Ideally this would occur once sufficient rapport has been established with members. The goal will be to draw as representative a sample of gang members as possible, around such parameters as core/peripheral membership, ethnicity, and gender. Audio tape in-depth interviews if this is possible. Begin with a semi-structured interview guide drawn from the topics outlined below, but allow for shifts in topics driven by the interviewee, as this may yield important unforeseen information. At the inception of fieldwork, you may want to do some informal interviews with participants to assist in developing a framework for asking questions in the more formalized semi-structured interview. If, upon preliminary analyses of initial interviews, some topics have not received sufficient coverage, or important topics emerge that were not examined systematically, plan to complete follow-up interviews, where possible, with previous interviewees, and revise the interview guide for subsequent interviews to ensure topical coverage.
- (c) *Examination of Key Events* – During data collection, care should be made to follow up on a number of designated key events. These are events that happen involving gang member(s), and present an opportunity for the gang to open up for the researcher in order to provide insights into the realities of gang life. Combining this sort of observational data collection with in-depth interviewing will better enable the researcher(s) to compare and analyze gang discourses (as reflective of gang norms/values/ideals) versus actual activities (which may reflect notable distinctions between ideas and practices). Key events may involve the following: (1) events defined as key by gang members, for instance, as illustrated by a moment in which members focus on the values and norms of the group by discussing the key event; (2) events that mobilize gang members; (3) the interplay between gang members and individuals external to the gang, for instance officials, members of the wider community.

- (d) *Interviews with Non-Gang Community Members* – This will allow the researcher to situate the gang in its wider context, and will also provide a means of assessing the reliability of information provided by gang members through triangulation. Talking with community members such as the police, agency and institution personnel will provide important additional perspectives that will allow the researcher(s) to examine the gang from different angles. It should be recognized that these individuals will provide information about gangs from their specific position vis-à-vis youth gangs and these data should be compared to gang data with this recognition in mind, rather than a source of data that—when contradictory to information collected from gang members—is a better reflection of reality. Instead, each facet of the data collection should be recognized as contributing a particular set of information to the case study.

(5) Protection of Human Subjects

Human Subjects approvals and standards for informed consent will be dealt with on a site-by-site basis; each researcher will gain the minimum requirements necessary in a particular site. If the researcher(s) witness an event such as a serious crime they will consult with the project coordinators about how to proceed.

TOPICS TO BE ADDRESSED

Information will be gathered about (a) history and local setting, (b) the group, (c) individual gang members, and (d) gang culture. Time permitting, additional information will be collected on (e) interventions, and (f) contrast to provide additional contextual information on the group.

- (a) *History and Local Setting* – the following topics will be addressed, in the interviews with gang members and non-gang community members: origin, duration, history of the gang (with special attention to transformations), incidents, links to the neighborhood. Other local information should be collected as well, to better provide an embedded portrait of the gang and its members, including socioeconomic conditions of the setting; patterns of ethnic/national migration, culture and acculturation (including gender ideologies and family relations); racism and racial conflict. This information will provide contextual information about the nature of the gang problem in the research setting and its linkages with the broader neighborhood/community.
- (b) *Group Descriptions* – the following dimensions will be addressed: territoriality, size, age range, subgroupings, criminal involvement (including the depth of criminal involvement, specialization, with special attention to violence, weapons use, and crimes for financial gain such as drug sales), leadership, gang structure, “tension structures” (e.g., sources of conflict and cohesion), gender, ethnicity and class composition of gang, and information about the existence (or lack) of rival groups. Girls’ roles within the gang will be compared to boys’. Gang characteristics will be compared to the Maxson/Klein typology of gangs in the U.S. (e.g., traditional, neotraditional, collective, compressed, specialty gangs).

- (c) *Individual Gang Members* – the following topics will be addressed, primarily in the semi-structured interviews: family background (including kinship networks within the gang), schooling and employment, criminal background, key life events, socioeconomic background, motivations for gang joining and participation, personal networks and roles within and outside the gang, mobility/social space, a typical day (e.g., activities, who they meet, what they do), prevention/intervention experiences, institutional connections, victimization histories within and outside the gang, issues of gender/race/ethnicity/migration, avenues of desistance/exit from the gang
- (d) *Gang Culture* – the following will be explored: everyday life, practices and routines as a reflection of gang values; the dominant values that steer group behavior, justifications of behavior, with sensitivity to political and/or religious orientations of the group; appearance (including symbols) with a special emphasis on where these come from (e.g., links between local and global gang symbolism; linkages between gang culture, race/ethnicity, racism and acculturation). Relationships between males and females, males and males, and females and females will be examined in order to understand the nature of gender within the gang.

Additional foci (time permitted)

- (e) *Prevention/Intervention* – the following possible prevention and/or intervention programs will be looked for: contact with youth workers, work/school programs, facilities for the group to meet/hang out, and other programs targeting gang youths.
- (f) *Contrast* – the research methods used do not include a control group, as they are focused on providing a case study. In order to be able to tell, to some degree, if what is observed, heard and noted is particular for this setting, this group, these individuals, this gang culture, elements of contrast should be looked for. For instance, do youths outside the gang behave differently? If so, in what ways? The data collection outlined in this protocol, when adopted consistently by Eurogang participants at different sites, will allow for systematic comparisons.

Upon completion of the ethnographic investigation, the investigator is asked to create a brief summary description (approximately a page in length) of the gang under investigation based on the criteria listed in (b) Group Descriptions above. This summary description will provide a snapshot of information for comparison with other groups investigated using ethnographic methods.

In order to assess comparability of the groups studied, we ask the ethnographers to collect information so that at the end of the study they can provide a face sheet that answers the following questions:

1. What is the age/age range of group members?
2. What is the gender/sex composition of the group?
3. What is the ethnic composition of the group?

4. Are members of the group members of an immigrant group?
5. Is illegal behavior accepted and performed? (if yes, describe)
6. What are the most common crimes?
7. Is alcohol and drug use accepted and performed behavior?
8. What is the size of the group?
9. Does this group have a name? (if yes, what is it?)
10. Does this group regularly spend time in public places? (if yes, describe)
11. Are there subgroups within this group? (if yes, what are the criteria that separate these subgroups?)
12. What is the term used to define this group? (e.g., gang, bande, clique)
13. Does this group have a territory it defends? (if yes, describe)