

Gangs of Chicago: Perceptions of Crime and its Effect on the Recreation Behavior of Latino Residents in Urban Communities

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Perception of safety is an important factor affecting the leisure behavior of Latinos residing in urban neighborhoods. Yet research on how fear of crime and fear of gangs in particular affect leisure of ethnic and racial minorities is underdeveloped. The objectives of this study are to examine how gangs operate in recreation spaces in Latino neighborhoods, how gangs affect the use of outdoor recreation environments and how Latinos respond to these issues. The study is based on focus groups conducted with Latino residents in Chicago. Findings indicate gang members are almost constantly present in parks, which serve as spaces for drug use and distribution. Moreover, gangs operate in other areas of the neighborhood making it unsafe to access parks. Participants employ strategies to address the gang problem including avoidance, protective and collective behaviors.

Keywords fear of crime, gangs, Latinos, recreation

Perception of safety is an important factor affecting leisure of Latinos residing in urban neighborhoods (Stodolska, Shinew, Acevedo, & Gobster, 2008). Although safety issues have been examined (Whyte & Shaw, 1994), they have rarely been tackled in the context of the leisure of ethnic and racial minorities. Evidence, however, shows that many neighborhoods where minorities reside are notoriously unsafe and that parks and playgrounds are often settings of conflict between rivaling groups of users (Gobster, 1998). Much of the fear of crime stems from gang violence prevalent in many inner-city neighborhoods. Manifestations of gang activity such as drive-by shootings, drug use, vandalism and intimidation can have profound influence on the places people use for recreation, times when they recreate and on their choice of recreation companions.

The United States has seen a steady increase in gang activity and the concomitant fear of gang crime during the last two decades (Lane & Meeker, 2003). Gang activity is considered a major contributing factor to many criminal offenses, including homicide, drug use and intimidation. Incidents such as the shooting at a Los Angeles bus stop of eight bystanders by a gang member (CNN News, 2008) or the death of a 17-year-old football star

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who was gunned down in Los Angeles in what police described as a random unprovoked gang attack (FOX News, 2008) result in daily media coverage of gang-related violence, which fuels fear of gangs among the general population.

According to estimates from the Federal Bureau of Investigations, there are at least 30,000 gangs with 800,000 members across the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). In Chicago alone, at least 40 organized street gangs have an estimated 38,000 members (Chicago Police Department, 2007). They represent all the racial and ethnic groups, are organized into two major factions called *Peoples* and *Folks* and are active in virtually every community. Definitions of what constitutes a gang have been developed, but the one that will be employed in this study considers gangs as

any identifiable group of people who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group . . . , and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement. (Klein, 1971, p. 13)

Research on gangs and gang crime in the fields of criminology, psychology, and sociology is extensive. Studies have (a) examined factors that induce individuals to join a gang and participate in criminal activity (Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 1999); (b) explored the relationship between antisocial behavior, gang membership and child development (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001); (c) considered the operation of gangs in the prison system (Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran, & Suppa 2001); (d) investigated women's involvement in gangs (Miller, 1998); and (e) noted the relationship between gang operations and drug trade/use (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). None of these studies, however, has investigated the effect gang activity has on the use of recreation spaces and on the leisure behavior of residents of communities where gangs operate.

The objectives of this study, therefore, are to (a) examine how gangs operate in recreation spaces in Latino neighborhoods and how gangs affect the use of outdoor recreation environments and (b) analyze responses of Latino residents regarding the gang problem in their neighborhoods. Several theoretical frameworks are used in this study. The main theoretical framework is a model by Gates and Rohe (1987) that classifies strategies to cope with crime. Other theoretical frameworks explaining the development of fear of gang crime include diversity, disorder and decline models (Lane & Meeker, 2003, 2005).

Literature Review

Research on the effects of fear on recreation behavior is not well developed, and work that specifically examines fear of gang crime in the context of leisure is scarce. Studies that have investigated issues of fear have usually examined the role of fear as a constraint on women's leisure and its impact on participation in physical activity.

Fear of Crime and its Effect on Women's Lives, Including Leisure

Researchers studying the effects of fear of crime on people's lives, including their leisure, have explored the phenomena primarily from the perspective of women. Gates and Rohe (1987) defined fear of crime as "the affective experience associated with the perceived personal risk of victimization" (p. 427). They claimed that fear of crime is distinct from general perceptions of crime even though "perceptions of crime are the beliefs about crime levels or trends, fear is the result of assessments of personal vulnerability to victimization" (p. 427). A significant body of research has demonstrated that women fear violence more

than men, although women are less likely to be victimized (Lane & Meeker, 2003, 2005; Mehta & Bondi, 1999). Ferraro (1996) explained women's higher levels of fear by their fears of rape that may "shadow" other types of crimes. Research has also shown that although women fear being victims of sexual attacks in public places, they are more at risk of being victimized by someone they know in private spaces (Mehta & Bondi, 1999; Valentine, 1989).

Studies have focused on the types of crime women are most afraid of and on the mechanisms through which their fear of crime affects their behavior. For instance, Keane (1998) found that many women were afraid of walking alone after dark and walking alone to their cars in parking garages. Mehta and Bondi (1999) reported that the majority of women made a conscious effort not to allow fear of violence to significantly affect their everyday lives or to restrict their ability to move freely in public spaces. However, they were "sensible" and took "common sense precautions" (p. 75), which meant not walking at night or going to clubs and bars alone.

Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) described women who had been harassed or attacked while participating in outdoor activities. They developed fears of going outside by themselves that led to their lower participation in physical activity as well as mental and physical stress. As a result, some women discontinued participation in leisure activities, participated with partners, left information about their whereabouts, carried a whistle or mace or a gun, trained in self-defense, or wore clothing that did not attract attention. Similar constraints were reported by Woodward et al. (1989), who found more than half of women reported fear of returning from leisure activities alone after dark and fear of using public transportation.

In another study that examined the effects of fear on people's leisure, Whyte and Shaw (1994) reported that female interviewees felt somewhat safer participating in women-only group activities such as going to bars or movie theaters than recreating by themselves. Similar negotiation strategies were identified by Coble, Selin and Erikson (2003), who examined fears and negotiation strategies employed by women solo hikers. Coble et al. identified five types of fears experienced by hikers: fear of getting hurt by another person, fear of wild animals, fear of accident or a life threatening emergency, fear of having personal belongings stolen from the car and the fear of getting lost.

Fear of Crime and its Effect on Participation in Physical Activity

Studies exist in public health and kinesiology that document how fear of crime, linked to the perceptions of disorder, affects people's participation in physically activity. As Loukaitou-Sideris and Eck (2007) argued, "Living in neighborhoods with high physical and/or social disorder generates stress and fear. Physical incivilities (e.g., deteriorated or abandoned buildings, litter, graffiti) or social incivilities (e.g., public drunks, beggars, panhandlers, homeless) produce feelings of risk and fear" (p. 382). Fear has also been shown by Roman and Chalfin (2008) to be related to the actual level of crime in the area. In high crime areas, men as well as women reported being fearful of walking outside. Other studies have shown that people who exhibit higher levels of fear walk less (Ross, 2000; Ross & Mirowski, 2001) and that this relationship is particularly strong for women (Foster, Hillsdon & Thorogood, 2004). Fear often resulted in women's deciding to drive or take a taxi rather than to walk or use public transportation. In extreme cases, women completely avoided certain leisure spaces or visited them only when accompanied by others (Loukaitou-Sideris & Eck, 2007). Conversely, in a pan-European study, men and women with higher perceptions of safety were more likely to engage in exercise (Shenassa, Liebhaber & Ezeamama, 2006). Similarly, a study by Harrison, Gemmell and Heller (2007) showed that people who felt safe in their neighborhood were more likely to be physically active.

Theoretical Background

Models Predicting Development of Fear of Gang Crime

Research shows that characteristics of the offenders such as gang affiliation might be important in producing fear as gangs are often portrayed as ruthless and hard to control, and their attacks frequently victimize innocent bystanders caught in the cross-fire of drive-by shootings (Lane & Meeker, 2005). Moreover, gangs operate in community spaces used by law-abiding residents such as streets, parks, and playgrounds. As Lane and Meeker argued, "Gangs can be a particularly important factor related to fear in some areas. . . because gang presence is often an indicator of social disorganization and is associated with disorder in the community—factors that are also known to be key predictors of fear" (p. 628).

Researchers also have indicated that diversity, disorder and decline (i.e., factors that have been found to explain fear of crime more generally) are also useful in predicting fear of gangs (Lane, 2002; Lane & Meeker, 2003, 2005). The *subcultural diversity model* predicts that people who live close to individuals of different racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds develop fears because they do not understand the culture, lifestyle or behaviors of their neighbors (Lane & Meeker, 2005). In such communities, lack of strong friendship networks makes people more afraid of strangers who are seen as different and not sharing the same commitment to the community (Lane & Meeker, 2003). As Madriz (1997 quoted in Lane & Meeker, 2005, p. 631) argued, "Immigrants are often blamed for crime and. . . criminals are exemplified by both Whites and minorities as the dark skinned man who haunts us from the shadows of alleys and public parks." In support of the subcultural diversity model, Lane found that both White and Latino residents of Santa Ana, California, believed that presence of undocumented Latino immigrants led to community disorder that caused community decline, which ultimately led to the development of fear of gangs.

According to the *disorder/incivilities/broken windows model*, people who see signs of disorder in their communities such as trash, broken windows, rundown buildings, graffiti, drug paraphernalia, and gang members or prostitutes hanging out, perceive them as signs of "deeper underlying problems" (Lane & Meeker, 2003, p. 431), which creates more fear. Interestingly, most studies have shown that while *perceptions* of community disorder were consistent predictors of people's fears, *objective* signs of disorder were not (Taylor, 2001; Taylor, Shumaker & Gottfredson, 1985). Similarly, actual crime levels did not always translate into fear levels, and those who were at most risk of victimization (e.g., young males) usually exhibited less fear than did older adults and women who were least likely to be victimized (Lane & Meeker, 2003).

Community concern (decline) model predicts that fear is a result of residents' concern that the community is undergoing changes and is less safe now than in the past (Lane & Meeker, 2003). Researchers have indicated that people who are more integrated into their neighborhood are less fearful, while people who believe that their neighborhood is on decline exhibit more fear (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). These findings were supported by Crank, Giacomazzi and Heck (2003), who argued that community members who were able to develop strong relationships with their neighbors and knew the community well were less fearful of crime.

Models of Coping with Fear of Crime

Gates and Rohe's (1987) model distinguished three categories of behavioral responses to crime: avoidance, protective and collective reactions. The researchers defined *avoidance reactions* as the individual responses to actual or perceived crime with the goal to "avoid people, places, situations, or activities that expose one to the risk of victimization" (p. 427).

They may include “staying at home at night, staying clear of a particular street or park, or activities that expose one to the risk of victimization” (p. 427). *Protective reactions* refer to “target hardening” or “access control” measures and may include installing locks, alarms, carrying a whistle or a weapon, or other measures to guard oneself outside the home. Gates and Rohe identified two types of *collective reactions* to crime: formal and informal. Formal reactions involve “participation in an organization or program that sponsors crime prevention activities” (p. 427). Informal reactions involve “less structured cooperation through communication, mutual surveillance and intervention” (p. 428) such as watching over neighbors’ house when they are away or directly intervening during a disturbance. Gates and Rohe’s classification will be used to structure parts of the results of this study and to help interpret some findings.

Methods

A grounded theory approach was used in this study. Grounded theory is an inductive process which allows for the development of theory by systematically gathering and analyzing data to identify relationships that explain social processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To collect data, this study employed focus groups with Latino Americans residing in two predominantly Latino communities in Chicago: Little Village (pop. 91,071 – 83% Latino) and East Side (pop. 23,688–68% Latino; U.S. Census, 2000). Four focus groups were conducted between June and September 2007. Two were conducted with Latinos born in the United States and two with first-generation immigrants. Focus groups were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until no new theoretical ideas were emerging. Interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling through existing contacts as well as through local churches and Latino-own businesses.

In all, 26 Latinos (13 men and 13 women) took part in the focus groups. Participants were between early twenties and late sixties. All interviewees were of Mexican descent. Participants were asked about their socio-economic characteristics, place of residence and length of residence at this location and not about the legality of their status in the United States. All participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of this study.

Focus groups lasted between 1½–2½ hours. Interviews with first generation immigrants were conducted in Spanish and those with Latinos born in the United States were conducted in English. One of the researchers was born in Mexico and, for a period of time, resided in one of the neighborhoods investigated in the study. His cultural background, fluency in Mexican Spanish and knowledge of issues of local Latino communities helped in establishing rapport with participants and in interpreting findings of the study. Participants were paid \$25 for participation. Focus groups were tape-recorded and videotaped. They were transcribed verbatim and those conducted in Spanish were translated to English by the Mexican-American researcher. The translation was verified by two independent individuals fluent in both languages.

An interview guide was used to help structure the focus groups. Focus groups started with participants being asked about factors affecting their use of local natural environments for recreation. Since safety and maintenance of facilities surfaced strongly in the first focus group, they were followed up in subsequent conversations. For instance, the participants were asked: “How serious, in your view, is the crime problem in your community?” “Is safety one of the things you consider while visiting neighborhood parks?” Probes such as “do you know how many/which gangs operate in this area?” and “does gang activity affect your recreation participation; if so, in what ways?” were used to direct the discussion. Care was taken, however, to avoid leading the responses of those who participated in subsequent focus groups. As with any focus group discussion, some participants were more vocal than

the others. However, we made sure that each participant had an opportunity to voice his/her opinions on each of the topics covered in the discussion. Individual questions such as “and how do *you* feel about this?” were included following the general discussion.

The analysis of the material began after the first focus group was completed and continued throughout the duration of the study. Following each focus group, two sets of notes were created. The first set included all the contextual information regarding the focus group in question. The second set included a summary of the main themes that had surfaced during the conversation and the researchers’ preliminary interpretation of the information. After all focus groups had been transcribed, the transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, the data were divided into two major categories: (a) how gangs operate in recreation spaces and the effect they have on the utilization of outdoor environments and (b) the responses of Latino residents to the gang problem. During the subsequent stages of analysis, the main subthemes under each category were identified. The subthemes of the second major theme (i.e., responses to the gang problem) were grouped according to Gates and Rohe’s (1987) framework into avoidance, protective and collective behaviors. To isolate the themes and subthemes and to group them into categories, each transcript was independently read several times by all three researchers and then discussed until a consensus was reached on the classification of the interview responses. After all relevant points had been synthesized, the transcripts were re-read again to ensure that all important aspects of the phenomena had been included.

Due to the sensitive nature of the discussion topic and the population under study (e.g., possibly undocumented status of many participants), the decision was made not to ask participants for their contact information. This precluded the possibility of sending focus group transcripts to the participants for verification and feedback. To increase trustworthiness of the study, however, each transcript was verified with the recording by at least two researchers to avoid possible transcription errors. Member checking was also used in which themes that emerged from the study and researchers’ interpretations were presented to several knowledgeable community members who did not participate in the focus groups. They were asked to comment on the plausibility of the interpretations made by the researchers (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). These individuals included people in charge of several community organizations (e.g., LVejo, Enlace), Commander of the 10th District of the Chicago Police Department, Superintendent of Piotrowski Park, a school principal and a pastor of a local church. They were chosen due to their extensive knowledge of matters of the local communities. Information from these member checks was used to help explain and put in context some of the findings of the study (e.g., the extent of gang activity in the neighborhoods).

Findings

The findings of this study were divided into two main sections. First, we examined how gangs operate in recreation spaces in Latino neighborhoods and how they affect the use of outdoor recreation environments in the studied communities. Second, we employed Gates and Rohe’s (1987) classification to analyze responses of Latinos to the gang problem.

Operation of Gangs in Recreation Spaces in Latino Neighborhoods and the Effect they Have on the Use of Outdoor Recreation Environments

Presence of gangs in parks. Several subthemes surfaced with respect to the operation of gangs in recreation spaces. First, participants commented that gang members were almost constantly present in local parks. Gangs “owned the parks,” and parks were public spaces

that gangs often fought over. Daniel, a 23-year-old recent university graduate from Little Village, remarked that gangs established presence in parks since parks were convenient meeting places in the neighborhood:

I think some of the problems are because this [the park area] is public, everyone has access to it. People, such as gangbangers, try to take possession of it. "This is mine." It is not supposed to be like that! This is public! Everyone can go to it and have the little social interaction there.

David, another immigrant interviewee, added:

There is a thing with gangs and parks. For example, the only park we have is Piotrowski. The gangs have it really controlled. The gangs gain hold of the parks. Then, it doesn't really matter if you have a park and you don't have security in it. No one would want to go to the park.

During our fieldwork in Little Village, we established that there were six Latino gangs operating in the neighborhood. The two biggest gangs—Latin Kings and Two Six—had the neighborhood divided roughly in two equally sized parts (i.e., east/west) along Lawndale Avenue. Piotrowski Park, the only bigger park in the neighborhood, was located in the South East corner of the community and was under the control of the *Two Six* gang. Although the park itself was not close to the contested gang boundary, drive-by shootings were a major concern to park users. Angelica, a 26-year-old mother of three, described the local park environment: "Even when you are driving on 31st Street you can see them, they are on each corner of the park. You are in the car and there are two right here and two right here. And they are just watching you, who's in the car."

Gang-related drug activity in parks. Another subtheme dealt with gang-related drug activity in the parks. Gang members often used local parks as hangouts and convenient places to sell and use drugs. Lucia, an immigrant from East Side, reminisced that when she was growing up parks were "really beautiful" and had many trees, basketball courts, soccer fields and baseball diamonds. The conditions, however, had changed in recent years. "Not long ago I went [to the park] and there was a little truck there. I went to buy some food and a few steps away there were people smoking drugs. They just made [gang] signs and I said "let's go'." Gang members not only used drugs in parks, but also used parks as convenient places for selling drugs to their customers. For instance, Paulina, a student from Little Village, recalled:

One of my cousins used to hang out with the wrong crowd and people in her high school, few of them were gang bangers. We would walk to the park and she would say "hi" to them. Like on 31st Street [Piotrowski Park], they are on all corners, and she knew who they were because they were gangbangers. They are there because they are selling drugs.

Presence of gangs in public areas of the neighborhood. Participants also commented that gangs "hijacked" the entire neighborhood and made it unsafe to play, walk or bike on the street, or travel to the park. For instance, Little Village residents living on the East side of Lawndale Avenue (Latin Kings territory) were concerned about walking to Piotrowski Park through the area controlled by the Two Six gang. Asked whether there was one or

more gangs in Little Village, Paulina laughed and said, "If there was one gang in all Little Village, there would not be much danger!" She continued:

You just drive down the alley and you see all the tags. Like this is Latin Kings [territory]. This is the Two Six territory. My uncle lives on the corner and he has to paint his garage once a month, just because people are trying to mark their territory. The killings this past week were . . . one guy on one side got killed so they killed two kids from the other side.

Such walks through the neighborhoods became particularly dangerous during the frequent fights over the gang territory or after a shooting where residents were awaiting an imminent retaliation from the opposing gang. Martha, a 25-year-old teacher's assistant from Little Village, recalled an incident that happened to her and her friend from an adjacent neighborhood:

It was two blocks down from here. Two days ago a friend came from Cicero. He drove to here and his brother was wearing a cap and he was wearing it regularly. He wasn't doing anything and they started asking him. And they ended up punching his brother who was on the passenger side before they were able to pull up the windows. So, it's unsafe for guys just being in the car, so I can imagine being in the park. . . .

Belen, an immigrant residing in Little Village, described how a street festival in her neighborhood was interrupted by a gang-related shooting. The incident occurred a year prior to the focus group. The citizens' committee received permission to close 10 streets and sponsored "games, basketball, balloons, a carnival, hotdogs, and lights. . . . There was music, food, basketball, there were boys 6–12 years old playing and competing in teams." Belen liked the event as it brought families together by making them play for the teams and because it was attended by a mix of people, including Blacks, Latinos and Puerto Ricans. After dark, some cars passed by on 31st Street and the occupants started shooting. As a result, the crowd dispersed and people went back to their houses.

Gang activity in the neighborhood affected residents' recreation behavior in general but also the choice of parks they visited. When asked why Andres did not visit Douglas, a large park several blocks from his place of residence, he replied, "It gets dangerous, sometimes when you are walking back. They don't know you so they will start saying stuff. They treat you like crap. . . people who live around it [the park] and sometimes [people] in the park." According to the Commander of the 10th District of the Chicago Police Department (Zavala, 2008, personal communication), the area adjacent to the Douglas Park is controlled by five gangs—the New Breed, Satan Disciples, Gangster Disciples, and Insane Cullerton Deuces (belonging to the Folks Nation Alliance) and by Latin Kings (belonging to the People Nation Alliance). Thus, a person residing in the area controlled by the Latin Kings would be in significant danger crossing the territory of any of the gangs belonging to the Folks Alliance.

Responses of Latino Residents to the Gang Problem

Following Gates and Rohe's (1987) classification, three main themes were identified with respect to the responses of Latino residents to the gang problem: avoidance behaviors, protective behaviors and collective behaviors.

Avoidance Behaviors

Avoid parks and dangerous parts of the neighborhood. Many of the interviewees noted that they avoided parks and dangerous parts of their neighborhood and did not allow their children to play outside. As a result, they had to forgo some of their favorite activities, travel outside of their neighborhood for leisure or participate in leisure indoors. Belen described a situation where a group of women who used to jog on their children's school track abandoned the activity due to the presence of "young men" in the vicinity of the school. It was unclear if these men were members of a gang, and yet the fear of crime made women abstain from the activity.

Several participants chose to travel to other neighborhoods for leisure to ensure their safety. Angelica made sure to supervise her children while they were playing in the backyard and drove them to a different neighborhood to go for walks. She commented, "There are a lot of gangbangers around this area. I don't feel safe with my kids. Because two weeks ago they just shot someone right on the corner of my house. It is scary. When we go outside we usually go far. Not around here."

Alberto, Daniel, and Javier chose to travel to the suburban forest preserves in search of a safe leisure environment. Daniel commented, "We would go to the suburbs or a forest preserve where we can [play] soccer, even if there is nothing else. You know, calm or whatever. Not on regular basis, but maybe on the weekend." He added that if he had spent time in the front yard of his house in Little Village, he would likely have been harassed by "these people." "They might try to entice you to join a gang. What are you going to do. . . if you live in this community?"

Martha almost completely gave up visiting parks and decided to use indoor facilities for exercising instead. She commented:

When I was little we used to go to the park. There were a lot of activities. Well, I wasn't involved much, but I know we did go. But from when I was 10 years old to now I don't go to parks that often. I rather have a membership to Bally's.

Visit parks at certain times of the day. Many participants indicated that they visited parks but only at certain times of the day when the gang activity was at its minimum. Lucia commented that she avoided parks after dark, especially during winter. She was concerned about the lack of visibility because of the vegetation in the park and lack of surveillance cameras. Other participants, including Elizabeth, also raised the issue of dense vegetation. She indicated that park locations with dense trees and bushes made her uneasy as they could hide danger, such as "a body might be there or something else." Elizabeth also commented that "after a certain hour" parents with children would leave the park when it became a hangout for the "bad kids."

In the Southside, you might have a lot of families with their kids going to the park during the day, but then after a certain hour, they all go home because then all the other kids start coming in, you know, the bad kids and start hanging out.

Others such as Paulina visited parks in the morning when "gangs haven't woken up yet" and were especially aware of their surroundings while recreating:

Ever since I've been home [from school] I've been running in the park. It can feel not safe a lot of the times. I try to go in the morning. In the morning all the families are with the kids and they are all just playing baseball because that's when the games are. The gangs haven't woken up yet.

Move out of the neighborhood. Due to gang activity, many of the younger participants went as far as contemplating permanently relocating from the neighborhood. Daniel who just returned to Little Village after spending four years in college commented, "I'll probably move out. If I have children one day I would like to have more safety." Paulina nodded her head, saying, "I would never live here [after college]. Definitely not." Martha agreed. "I would stay in the city until I have children and then go. I love the city, but I want my kids to have a big backyard and maybe a pool. And do all sorts of things I couldn't do but I want them to have the opportunity and live in a safe environment."

Protective Behaviors

Rely on police. Many participants chose to visit parks that had visible police presence. David, an immigrant interviewee from Little Village, went to McKinley Park because it was a place where police patrols met to "report themselves." Andres commented that he and his friends usually played sports at the field adjacent to Little Village High School. "It's a little safer there because there are more cops around there." Javier compared Calumet Park with little police presence to suburban parks where he felt safer due to visible presence of the law enforcement:

When you go to Calumet Park, there's usually one cop car going around the area, whereas if you go to other park areas, you have cop cars, you have police on bicycles. When I see something like that, it's like a comfort zone. You really get comfortable, like "You know what? I enjoy being here." And if they do that in other parks, invest money and have a little bit more patrols like that it would be much better.

Other participants, however, were quite skeptical about the effectiveness of police protection in parks and other public areas. Lilia, a 24-year-old woman from East Side, commented, "There is, of course, police enforcement, but they can't be everywhere at the same time." Lucia agreed: "They drive around, but it takes them a long time to go all the way around. By the time they come back, they're [gang members] done doing whatever it is they're doing."

Participants also commented about a significant level of distrust in the community toward police officers who were known to stop and often mishandle youth who happened to resemble gang members in their dress patterns. Some residents were also reluctant to turn for help to the police as they were afraid that it would bring attention to their undocumented status and result in a deportation. Daniel commented, "There is an issue about illegality. If you are undocumented you don't want to go and speak up. [The authorities may ask you] 'Who are you?' You can't do that. You just got to deal with the gang bangers problem yourself."

Visit the park in larger groups or travel through the area with someone known to local gang members. Some of the female participants commented that when they visited parks they made sure to go in a larger group. Andres also described that knowing someone in the neighborhood through which he was crossing provided some measure of safety:

The thing that helps you a lot is if you know someone from the neighborhood. You go with him and it's cool. But if you go by yourself it's another different story, you got to worry about it because if they don't know you they are going to beat your ass.

Dress smart. Several participants raised an issue of “dressing smart” or avoiding wearing gang colors and gang symbols to the park. They had to be familiar with the colors of the gang that controlled the park and had to make sure not to wear the colors of its enemies for fear of attack. For instance, Cristina, an East Side resident, commented, “One cannot go and dress up in colors that they use because if you are wearing them you get beat up.” Issue of dressing in “inappropriate colors” was not only related to park visitation but also to people moving from one part of the neighborhood to another that is controlled by a different gang. For example, if one traveled through the part of the neighborhood controlled by Latin Kings whose colors were black and gold, he or she would have to make sure not to dress in a combination of beige and black, which were the colors of the Two Six. Not only the colors but also dress patterns (e.g., bill of the baseball cap moved to the right or the left, one leg of pants rolled up, mascots, tattoos and emblems of bunnies, crowns or pitch forks) might have indicated membership in a different gang and led to an attack from its rivals.

Carry a weapon for protection. Some of the participants indicated that they were ready to take weapons with them to the park as a measure of protection. One of the female participants from Little Village revealed, “When we go to the park I take a knife with me when I go running by myself because I am scared to go.” This admission sparked heated debate among other focus group participants. Two male participants replied, “I think it’s better if you don’t take anything.” “Yeah, because they might have something else. It escalates.”

Befriend a gang member or join the gang yourself. Some of the participants admitted they would befriend local gang members to ensure their safety and that local young men often joined gangs for protection. Lucia revealed one of her strategies to ensure safety:

Where I live there is a gang leader of the Latin Kings. I take his little brothers to church or to my house. Then I felt that I didn’t really run a lot of danger because when he was with the group and he would pass by me he would tell them, “These people are untouchable.”

Daniel, Alberto, Lucia and Martha recounted stories of young men who decided to join gangs for protection. Alberto commented, “For guys it’s really enticing to join a gang. For several reasons. . . safety, protection, and respect. All these things that come with it.” Martha agreed, “Me as a girl it would be different. And guys, if you are not a gang banger then you are really unsafe because you don’t have protection.” Overall, focus group participants did not seem to blame young people for joining gangs. They perceived it as a survival strategy in the neighborhood that offered few resources to fight the gang presence.

Collective Behaviors

Rely on neighbors’ support; participate in the crime watch program. Several participants described situations in which local residents supported each other when faced with the gang problem. For instance, Lucia revealed, “If something happens, we would all wake up and try to protect ourselves between each other.” Carla added, “We get volunteers, people from the community that actually patrol the area.” However, participants believed that such collective responses to the crime problem were quite infrequent. For instance, Daniel commented that the undocumented status among many residents and high mobility of the population contributed to the low sense of community and hindered efforts toward addressing community problems. Martha added, “They [local Latino residents] don’t have pride in their community.” Paulina echoed her comment: “No one actually cares, takes a

stand or anything. Nothing is going to change or make it better. There is just this mentality that it's never going to change." Daniel elaborated on Paulina's comment: "I don't think it's about not caring, it's just believing that the change might happen. It's this sense that you can do something but nothing is going to happen, so why bother?"

Clean up the parks. The issue of poorly maintained parks being a magnet for gang activity sparked a strong response from focus group participants. Many believed that poor maintenance of park grounds and facilities, presence of graffiti, broken bottles and drug paraphernalia discouraged law-abiding citizens from visiting the parks. It led to further park deterioration and ultimately to parks being "taken over" by gangs. Participants voiced opinions that it was up to the local authorities and up to the police to curb the gang activity and ensure that parks were a welcoming environment to local residents. Daniel suggested that "cleaning up the parks" would help to break down the cycle of violence:

If there was more clean areas, like having actual grass, some flowers, [it would] make it look like a park, what it's supposed to be. That would induce people to bring children, people running at the park instead of being taken over by the gangbangers.

Javier believed that an investment by local authorities in the park maintenance could help to control the gang problem:

Certain people will be like, "No, we're not going to do that type of programming. Why bother wasting money on that?" But, at the same time, I think it's a win-loss situation. If you invest money, then you could invest in a cleaner area, cleaner neighborhood, less gangs, less crime. But if you don't invest money, you're going to have people running in the streets and doing graffiti and stuff like that.

Elizabeth shared Javier's views: "If we had more recreation places and more, bigger parks, greener parks, nicer parks, there'd be a lot less kids doing bad things than there is now. More security, then you wouldn't have all the bad kids hanging out."

Provide sport and recreation for the local youth. Providing sport and recreation activities for children in the park settings as well as after school programs were mentioned by participants in all focus groups. Most interviewees believed that improving access to such programs was critical since it would keep the children away from gangs, give them productive things to do, reduce boredom and provide alternative forms of association. Lilia commented:

I think recreation takes them away from the streets because instead of going out and doing stuff they shouldn't be doing, you see them, even late at night, playing baseball or volleyball. They're doing stuff which is keeping them away from doing crime.

Elizabeth described a park close to the Midway airport that used to be known as a hangout for "troubled kids." In an effort to address the problem, park workers put skateboarding rink that turned out to be a big draw for the local youth. As a result, "all those kids that were there at some point hanging out starting getting skateboards and actually doing something instead of doing their little crowds." Javier nodded his head, saying, "Yeah, people start associating each other with hobbies they do, skateboarding, basketball, instead of just hanging out."

Discussion/Conclusions

The results of the study highlighted the important roles that fear of crime in general and fear of gang crime in particular played as constraints to the use of parks and other public spaces in Latino neighborhoods. Such fear decreased the use of already scarce recreation environments in the communities and restricted outdoor recreation of local residents (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993). Feelings of fear caused mental and physical stress among residents, reduced enjoyment from participation and led to avoidance of certain leisure spaces or frequenting them only when accompanied by others (Henderson & Bialeschki; Loukaitou-Sideris & Eck, 2007; Whyte & Shaw, 1994). Fear of gang crime also made local residents travel for leisure to remote places perceived to be safer or to use indoor facilities. Feelings of fear were aggravated by a sense of hopelessness as to how to avoid being victimized and how to solve the crime problem in the community.

Consistent with the findings of other literature (e.g., Gobster, 1998), parks were seen as particularly dangerous places as parks were areas where the prevalence of gang activity was the highest. Moreover, dense vegetation was perceived by residents to make both the criminals and their potential victims less visible, thus increasing the likelihood of attacks. Danger, however, was not limited to specific recreation environments that could be avoided. Gang violence was random, hard to control and led to victimization of innocent bystanders in seemingly safe environments, such as playgrounds and busy streets. As such, it was more likely to produce fear (Lane & Meeker, 2005) and more difficult to negotiate by taking "common sense precautions." Moreover, it was not just certain remote areas that were seen as unsafe (e.g., down-town, wilderness) but also the residential areas (i.e., spaces that "belonged" to the interviewees and where they spent most of their leisure time).

Our study investigated people's *perceptions* and their fear of gangs and not the actual levels of crime victimizations. Many of the interviewees often had no way of identifying who the real gang members were and, quite likely, often mistook youth who dressed in baggy pants and congregated in parks to be gangbangers. This observation, however, did not make their fears any less real or less likely to affect their leisure behavior. Cases of mistaken identity also applied to police officers who, on occasions, may have targeted law-abiding Latino youth. Being unjustly stereotyped and mistreated by the police led to anger, frustration and mistrust of authorities and may have alienated and even pushed some of the young people toward the gang membership (Sanchez, 2003). Fear of gang crime in this study did not manifest itself as a gendered issue to the extent suggested by Ferraro (1996). We did not detect much difference in the frequency with which male and female participants reported feelings of fear nor in the negotiation strategies they adopted (other than joining the gang among the men).

Our findings confirmed the results of criminology researchers who indicate perceptions of disorder in the community heighten feelings of fear (Lane & Meeker, 2003, 2005). They also confirmed the subcultural diversity model by showing that Latino residents' fears were heightened by the presence of new immigrants in the area who were perceived as not being vested in the matters of the community and whose background could not have been verified. Subcultural diversity was seen less as diversity in the ethnic background, but more in the generational status of residents (less assimilated Spanish-speaking Latino parents and U.S.-born, English-speaking Latino youth). Such divisions not only contributed to the increasing gang problem in general (parents unable to exercise control over their children) but also to the development of fears fueled by the perceptions that older people no longer could understand and relate to their youth. We did not find much support for the community concern/decline model, perhaps because many of the participants were either young or were recent immigrants to the area. They did not seem to detect the deterioration of the community and only three participants mentioned community decline.

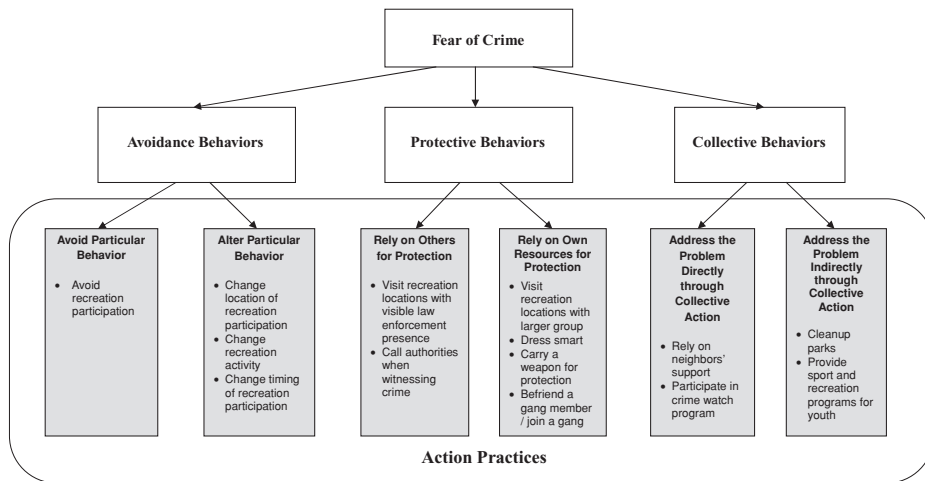


FIGURE 1 Reactions to the fear of crime and their relation to recreation behavior.

Our findings have helped us to extend Gates and Rohe's (1987) model of coping with crime by identifying different action practices related to avoidance, protective, and collective behaviors (see Figure 1). First, to avoid encounters with crime, interviewees either (a) *avoided participating* in certain recreational activities altogether or (b) *altered their recreation participation* (e.g., instead of playing in community parks they traveled to suburban forest preserves, took their children for walks outside the community, exercised in indoor locations, avoided parks in the evening). Some residents employed protective behaviors that either involved (a) *relying on others for protection* (e.g., police) to ensure their safety or (b) *relying on their own resources for protection* (e.g., visited recreation locations with a larger group, "dressed smart," or carried a weapon for protection). Collective behaviors included (a) those that were aimed at *directly addressing the problem through collective action* (organizing a crime watch program in the community) or (b) at *indirectly addressing the problem through collective action* (cleaning up the parks and providing recreation programs for the youth). We argue that it might be useful for researchers and practitioners to distinguish between coping strategies adopted by people who have different types and levels of resources at their disposal. For instance, while many middle class Americans may negotiate fear of crime by not recreating in dangerous places such as down-towns at night and by limiting their presence to their relatively safe suburban communities (Koskela, 1997; Mehta & Bondi, 1999), these negotiation strategies may not be available to many minority members. Altering recreation participation may not be as easy for some ethnic and racial minorities who reside and recreate in neighborhoods with high crime levels and who lack resources such as transportation, time, money and flexible work hours to allow for travel to relatively safer recreation destinations. These lower negotiation capabilities may translate to lower rates of participation in certain pastimes such as physical activity and outdoor recreation (Health United States, 2006; Washburne, 1978). We can also argue that undocumented status and past experiences with discrimination that translate to lack of trust in authorities (e.g., Blahna & Black, 1993) will be responsible for minorities' lower rates of reliance on outside help to assist with the negotiation of the crime problem and will force them to rely more on their individual resources. Both types of collective behaviors identified in this study are also likely to be hindered by a lower sense of community in some minority neighborhoods, low availability of material resources and insufficient support from authorities to develop recreation programs for the youth.

Results of this study also provided an addition to the literature on leisure behavior of ethnic and racial minority members and Latinos in particular (e.g., Gómez & Malega, 2007; Stodolska et al., 2008) by highlighting some of the less-explored constraints on recreation participation and factors affecting their recreational use of natural environments. The results also provided additional information to managers who strive to reduce crime and violent acts in outdoor recreation environments (Chavez, Tynon & Knap, 2004). They provided further evidence that crime activity needs to be curbed first to increase people's use of natural environments. Moreover, in line with Chavez et al., they showed that to restore acceptable levels of public safety, law enforcement officers need to collaborate with the users, their actions need to be consistent, and sound communication between the law enforcement and the residents is a crucial component of a successful campaign.

Our results provided support for the literature that suggests a role for recreation activities and spaces in combating crime problems in minority neighborhoods (Witt & Crompton, 1996). Many participants indicated that recreation activities may provide youth with productive things to keep them away from crime, while the maintenance and creation of new quality natural environments may decrease the perception of community disorder. We postulate that the role of recreation in combating gang problem will be highly dependent on the age of the target group and on the level of their involvement with gangs and other criminal activities. Providing recreational activities through parks, churches and community organizations is likely to be successful among younger teenagers, who are looking for affiliation and for alternative things to do in their leisure time. It may be less successful, however, among the older (18–24 age group), more committed gang members who have extensive criminal records and who might be involved in drug use and drug trade. Promoting recreation activities that would target children during their late childhood and early adolescence age groups that are at the highest risk of being recruited into gangs appears necessary.

This study, although offering interesting results, also had some limitations. It provided a qualitative examination of only two communities in Chicago. Thus, with the exception of the theoretical framework we have developed, the results may not be generalizable to other communities across the United States. Moreover, it focused on fear of gang crime among Latinos and whether similar results would have been obtained if the study had targeted other minorities or the mainstream population is unclear. It also examined people's perceptions only, which might be indirectly related to the actual experiences with crime.

The relationship between criminal activity, including gang crime, and recreation behavior is a topic of study that should be investigated further by leisure researchers. The effects of people's fears of crime on their recreation behaviors need to be investigated in more detail. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore how recreation might help to combat the gang problem in minority communities. Gang involvement in its own right constitutes leisure behavior for its members and, as such, it should be examined through the framework of *deviant* or *purple* leisure. Attraction of the gang life to youths that goes beyond the need for affiliation, opportunity for financial gain and resistance to the established order but also includes exciting leisure experiences should be examined if the goal is to understand all angles of this important issue.

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