Sociology 3338: Sociology of Gangs

Issue: Why is it important to study and understand the sociology of gangs? Here are some pointers to supplement your readings.

To start with, gang crime is a major serious problem in American society today. It has the potential to affect us all either as victims, taxpayers, citizens, and the community at large. If this problem is left unchecked, it can disrupt the social fabric of society thereby causing a sense of meaninglessness, a sense of fear among the public, lack of trust, community destabilization and disorganization. In the words of Durkheim, society’s failure to deal with issues like crime (gang) can cause a disruption in the social solidarity and stability of the community, leading to lawlessness, normlessness, or anomie. Sociologists have found that areas or communities that are infested with gang crime tend to have poor quality social and economic life, poor schools, youths who fail at school, infiltration of violence into the community, housing and property values go down, businesses might flee, unemployment might surge, and eventually the community might become completely disorganized that people will not want to live there.

Second of all, the study of gang behaviour falls within an important area of criminology and sociology. It is a subfield of criminology. The study of gang behaviour is important because as sociologists or criminologists, we want to be able to better understand the nature, form, pattern, volume, impact and causes (etiology) of gang behaviour.

Third, we want to have a gauge of the theories or explanations that have been developed in the social sciences to account for gang behaviour. Understanding of the causes of gang behaviour will enable to develop counter or preventive measures to deal with this social problem. The gang problem affects our youth. It affects the confidence that people have in their society, and basically it has the potential to fracture the cohesiveness and integration of people into society. Included in this are the cost to all of us, psychological, medical, cultural, and economic.

Fourth, we need to study gangs so that we can develop preventive measures at the local, state, national, and international levels to stamp out this canker. We have to do this by collecting data on the types and groups of gangs that operate in the community, bring the gang members to the attention of the criminal justice agencies and law enforcement authorities, and use the courts and correctional systems to prosecute and punish them who are found to be in violation. The goal here is public safety, public
security and the protection of society as a whole. Another goal here is to ensure that people will conform to and obey the laws of society and that they will not violate the laws of society with impunity. Here, another goal is to achieve deterrence; to use the justice system to punish those perpetrators of gang behaviour by using them as examples to the rest of the public that such behaviours will not be tolerated. The justice system should be clear in terms of the penalties that will be visited upon those people who violate the norms or laws of society.

Five, we want to study gang behaviour because we want to gain an insight into what works and what does not work when it comes to prevention and deterrence. Here, we are interested in how communities can mobilize to fight the gang epidemic, how to recognize the existence of gangs in the community, and how to work with the police and courts to fight this problem.

Sixth, no community is immune from this problem. The gang problem cuts across all social and community groups. It is not a white or black problem. It is a problem that transcends race, gender, class, and ethnicity. It affects small towns like Duluth, Cloquet, Superior and Esko. It also affect mega cities like Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago, Miami, and LA. Poor people join gangs, so do middle and upper class people. But a cautionary note is in order here. Sometimes media portrayal is that this is a black or Hispanic or Asian problem. No, no, no. neither is it only a male problem as some have suggested. Women gangs are sometimes more lethal than their male counterparts. The problem with gang behaviour is not the gangs in existence that we all know from LA, Minneapolis, the sharks, vice-lord, crips, the tongs, skin-heads and so forth. The problem is the ones that are covert or hidden from law enforcement agents and the community in which they operate. These unknown gangs that operate tend to be very insidious and lethal and in some cases may even infiltrate legitimate business and also work underground committing all sorts of heinous crimes for which the law enforcement agents are not able to form a clue as to who committed the crimes. It affects us all sociologically, culturally, and psychologically. The economic impact is daunting.

Seven, we need to study gangs so that we can understand the type of activities that they engage in and why. Why do some choose to specialize in racketeering, money laundering, loan sharking, narcotics, gambling, abductions and kidnappings, murder for hire, production of false identification materials for sale on the open market, prostitution, credit card frauds, and organized criminal syndicates? We need to know the answers to these from a sociological and cultural point of view. We need
to understand who they recruit and why? We need to understand their rites of passage and initiation culture as well. We need to understand the lure and the motivations or attractiveness of gangs to youths. The perennial question is always going to be: why do people join or form gangs. Once in, can they come out voluntarily. Are there any serious repercussions for gang members and their families? How about intra-gang warfare and the innocent people who sometimes get caught up in the lethality of gangs violence?

Eight, from a sociological point of view, we want to be able to understand why for some people gang behaviour has become a way of life. Why is it intergenerational for some members. How can we account for this? What are the symbols and fads that we can associate with gang behaviour in our communities? What should parents with kids look out for as a sign of gang presence? What signs should the police look out for as evidence of gang proliferation? How should the schools look out for the warning signs of gang membership and behaviour among students. More importantly, in terms of eradication, we want to understand the best practices for dealing with the gang problem in society. Should we have a zero tolerance for gang behaviour? How can communities improve upon the leisure activities of children to ward off gang behaviour? How do we bridge the gap between rich and poor such that gang behaviour does not become attractive to those who feel that society does not care about them or that they are worthless? Should we provide decent housing to ward off gang infiltration. Studies upon studies continue to show that gang behaviour thrives in neighborhoods that are dilapidated, disorganized, have a high rate of unemployment, school drop out, etc. To the extent that people perceive that they are deprived economically, to the extent people perceive a sense of meaninglessness, frustration, and anger or hostility toward society, gang behaviour may be chosen as a way of life to confront and deal with some of these pressing social issues.