

 STUDIES OF THE AMERICAS

YOUTH VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

*Gangs and Juvenile Justice
in Perspective*

Edited by

Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers



STUDIES OF THE AMERICAS

Edited by

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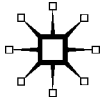
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-0-230-60056-0

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First published in 2009 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

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175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-37017-7 ISBN 978-0-230-10133-3 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230101333

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Youth violence in Latin America : gangs and juvenile justice in perspective / Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers (editors).

p. cm.—(Studies of the Americas)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Juvenile delinquency—Latin America. 2. Violent crimes—Latin America. 3. Gangs—Latin America. 4. Juvenile justice, Administration of—Latin America. I. Jones, Gareth A. II. Rodgers, Dennis.

HV9110.5.A5Y68 2009

364.106'60835098—dc22

2009013899

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: November 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

There are many people to whom we owe thanks in bringing this volume to completion. First among them are the staff at Palgrave-Macmillan who exhibited endless patience and forbearance as we missed deadlines. Special thanks go to Gabriella Georgiades who provided the initial contract for the book, to Joanna Mericle who worked with us as draft chapters were received, and to Colleen Lawrie, Samantha Hasey, and Julia Cohen who took the final manuscript through production, and to Diana Pritchard for preparing the index. We are also extremely grateful to Donna DeCesare of the University of Texas at Austin for providing us with an example of her powerful photography to use as the cover.

The idea for this volume emerged from an international workshop on youth violence in Latin America held at the London School of Economics and Senate House, the University of London, in 2005. We would like to thank the sponsors of the workshop, the London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre, the University of London Institute for the Study of the Americas, the Alistair Berkley Memorial Fund, the British Academy, the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Society for Latin American Studies. Neither the workshop nor this volume would have been possible without the support of Professor James Dunkerley, former director of the University of London Institute for the Study of the Americas. We thank all participants at the workshop for their presentations and involvement in promoting lively constructive debate.

Finally, the participation of Wagner dos Santos in both the workshop and this volume was made possible thanks to Tim Cahill and Damian Platt, then at Amnesty International. Both Tim and Damian also assisted with the interpretation of the talk Wagner gave at the workshop, a recording of which forms the basis for the preface of this book, augmented by notes from an interview conducted by Julia Rochester, and translated by Fernanda Regaldo.

Preface: Wagner's testimony

It is an unfortunate fact that many people who live in or work in Latin America as academics, for civil society organizations, development agencies or government, have firsthand experience of violence. At the same time, however, although such experience can sometimes involve great risks, it is rare for researchers and practitioners to be the victims of violence to the same degree as those they are studying or working with. Amidst the scare-mongering surrounding youth violence in contemporary Latin America the voice of both victims and perpetrators are rarely heard, and we were therefore keen to have this volume opened by someone who could speak of violence from direct personal experience.

Wagner dos Santos was 22 years old on July 23, 1993, when hooded men opened fire on a group of young people who were sleeping rough near the Candelária church in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. On most nights the area surrounding the church was a base for some 50 youths, and during the July attack, eight were killed, and dozens injured, including Wagner. Although several eyewitnesses came forward after the massacre, by the time the first Candelária case came to court only Wagner was still prepared to testify. Before being able to do so, however, he suffered a further attempt on his life in December 1994, despite having been placed in a "safe house." Following pressure from NGOs, the Federal government of Brazil sent Wagner to Europe for his own safety, but he courageously traveled back to Brazil in order to testify in trials against two policemen, Marcos Vinícius Borges Emanuel and Nelson Oliveira dos Santos Cunha, both of whom confessed to involvement in the Candelária killing after being identified by Wagner.

Wagner's account provides us with a firsthand insight of extreme violence suffered by a young person, whilst simultaneously highlighting the murky links that can exist between such violence and the justice system in Latin America. He begins by describing how he became homeless a few weeks before the massacre when police harassment forced him to leave the building in which he was living, and how he took to watching parked cars in the streets for money after losing his job as a street vendor. This activity only occasionally provided enough money to rent a bed for the night, so he would sleep rough, often around the Candelária church, seeking comfort

and security in numbers with others who hung around there, some of whom he knew from having been brought up in Rio's orphanage system. His description of being shot and left for dead is harrowing, as is the subsequent account of the persecution he suffered, which ultimately culminated in his being shot and left for dead a second time. But his voice is powerfully moving, and stands as a unique warning against the consequences of violence and injustice.¹

* * *

At the time, I lived in Vila do João,² with several former students.³ We didn't have any family, and a friend had given us that place. I worked as a street vendor. One night, the police came in the middle of the night—it was around midnight, one in the morning—saying that we had to leave, that this was a drug trafficking location, although everyone knew that there was no trafficking going on there. The police came in and we started to shout, “But we have nowhere to live, we have no family, we are all former FUNABEM [*Fundações Nacional do Bem-Estar do Menor*] students.” They left, but then they came back, over and over again, more policemen. One time they started beating everybody up, and then they would always hit us whenever they came. Then one day one of them said, “Listen, next time I come and find you here, I'll kill all of you.” At that point I told the other kids, “We can't carry on like this. We'll have to each live our own lives.” And so it was. I left and started looking after parked cars. When I could I would sleep in hostels, but sometimes on beaches, the Praça IV or Praça Mauá, sometimes on the streets in the Candelária.

The Candelária street youth would often get together, to play, or sniff glue. There was no set time. There was only a set time for sniffing glue. Otherwise they would come and go as they pleased, to get some food, to eat. Sometimes they would sit down, and everyone would play or sing. It was really interesting, they had no notion of time, of the hours, of what tomorrow would be like, or of the past, or what life might be like in 10 years, where I'll go from here—they never think about that. They live day to day. They have no sense of the dangers of life. So this is how it was. [But] It's interesting, sometimes they would put on theatre plays for themselves. There would always be something creative going on. So deep down despite their lack of knowledge they would be as creative as people that went to university.

The day of the massacre, we all went to the beach in the morning. There were too many of us so we had to split into groups and I joined one group. I was the only one to get to the beach, as the police told the other kids to get off the bus. I waited at the beach for the others but they never came, so around 4 or 6 pm, I went back to La Candelária, and I saw an argument between the kids and a policeman trying to arrest one of them.⁴ I didn't get involved and when it was over I went to talk to the boys to find out what had happened. There was a guy called Neilton who had been a former student with me who had taken some boy's glue, and had been sniffing it when some policemen had come up and started beating him up. Neilton had said the

glue was not his, that it was everybody's, and that instead of beating him, they should beat all of them. They didn't care. The police carried on hitting and hitting Neilton. One of the boys was so upset that he got a stone and threw it at the police car, breaking a window. I think a policeman also got hurt. The police took him to the police station, and he was detained until 7 pm. When he came back, he said that a policeman had told him that we should not stay in the Candelária because they would be coming back.

I then went with two other kids, Gambá and Paulo, to go and buy cigarettes, and as we walked back to the Candelária, we saw a car parked near the church, with its boot open. Some guy stopped the other two, and one of them went, "No, no, no!" I didn't know what was going on, so I kept walking. As I walked past, another guy said, "Police! Police!" and pulled out a gun. I stopped and put my hands up. He asked for my documents and asked if I was from here. I told him, "No, I live in Vila do João," and he said, "Let's go, even so." The policeman slapped me on the face, and I slapped him back, but then another one came up and he hit me on the head, and put a gun in my face, saying, "Remember me?" He asked us, "Where's Russo?" and Paulo told him, "He's in the Candelária." They then put us in the car and that's when they shot me.

I don't know how to explain the sensation... It's a bit like you're drowning... Like you're under the water... You go all numb... I remember one of the policemen shouting, "Let's take him to hospital," and the other kids in the car getting agitated, there were seven people in the car in total. Then I passed out. When I woke up, I was somewhere in Flamengo. Gambá was on one side of me, Paulo on the other. Neither of them was breathing, they were both dead. I got up and started to walk, and collapsed when I got to a gas station. The guy working there cried, "No! Don't fall there! What have you done?," but then a police patrol came along, and then the firemen, and I was taken to the hospital.

I didn't know what had happened in the Candelária, but when I was on a hospital trolley passing through the corridor, I was put next to "Come Gato" [a youth who was considered the leader of the Candelária group]. He was in a coma,⁵ and although I stayed on the trolley in the hospital corridor, I knew something had happened. Then in the morning I heard about the massacre, that a lot of kids had died. The police asked me to give a description of the policemen who had shot me, to help them draw up an identikit picture. Then they took me to the police station to make identifications, and there I started recognizing people. I spent a year in hospital. The BOPE, the Special Police,⁶ watched over me at first. They treated me respectfully, and one of them even gave me a radio. But after they left, this other guy came. He was sneaky, and he wanted to get to me psychologically. I can't remember which police force he was from, but he kept threatening me, he would say, "You fucker Wagner," "We'll get you," and so on. That was when I got Amnesty International to look into my case, and the police stopped threatening me.

After coming out of hospital I was put in a safe house with some of the other Candelária youth who had survived until the trial. The thing is that everybody knew where the safe house was, including the journalists, who

were the first to give away the secret. The truth is that they had nowhere to put the Candelária witnesses, and were just improvising, you know, “Hey! Let’s create a safe house.” So I thought, “Forget about this,” and went to Bahia instead, where I applied for a job at the Club Med. As I had some experience in catering, I got the job. It was wonderful! But after a few months I had to go down to Rio to identify some people. In Bahia they didn’t know who I was, but when I went back to Rio everyone saw it on TV. Then people started to torment me, torment me, torment me. They would call me stuff like criminal, bandit, thief, street kid. So I said to myself, “I’m leaving. I’m not staying in this place.” And I went back to the safe house in Rio.

Then one day I went out to visit a friend. I was close to the Central Station and this guy carrying a gun asked me, “Are you Wagner dos Santos?” I started running, but in order to get away I would have had to push over a small child who might have been hit by a bus, so I stopped running and they caught me. They handcuffed me to a lamppost and started to beat me up until I was all covered in blood. Everybody saw it, and people started saying, “Oh, it’s the Candelária kid, what has he done?” The guys beating me said I had been stealing. One stuck his hand into my pocket and took out a bunch of money. People said, “Well, if he’s been stealing you have to take him to the police station,” and so they took me out, handcuffed, and we came to a police kiosk where they identified themselves as policemen! Everybody saw that, [and] they started taking me to the 2nd District Police Department. I was just thinking to myself, “Now I’m screwed” when they pushed me against the wall and fired the first shot. I fell, but the guy—*ta, ta, ta!*—kept shooting, and then I passed out.

After that, it was arranged by Amnesty International for me to leave the country, but I came back to testify. I did so because I don’t agree with injustice. I have suffered so many injustices since I was a kid, it’s made me see that it’s so important to do the right thing. Despite all that’s happened to me, despite the fact that they tried to kill me, it was necessary for me to testify against them, because they took away the right to life of all those kids. The way they did it was so dishonorable, and cowardly. What happened to me was political. The policemen who shot me are guilty, but it’s more about politics than about them. They are victims too, deep down inside. When one is treated with respect, with care, one does not feel worthless. And deep down inside, they did what they did because what they do is seen as being of no value. Whether the police do a good job or not, nobody really cares in Brazil. There’s no respect, no pride in their work, they do it only to maintain their families, and deep down, this ends up making them feel worthless. . . I believe in justice, but justice has to come from the human being’s heart and from self-respect. When you respect yourself you can respect others. If people have no self-respect, then they will only exploit others.

* * *

Many people are surprised by Wagner’s lack of anger toward what happened at Candelária. Despite an obvious emotion at the deaths of close friends and

companions, he is keen to relate the massacre and its aftermath to a sense of justice—which he defines not in terms of a legal framework, but in terms of personal integrity and self-respect. He places the blame, not so much on the individual police who tried to kill him, but on a political culture in which it is hard to achieve self-respect. His disgust is mainly reserved for the politicians who fail to distribute Brazil's considerable wealth, and the systemic obstructions to justice. Wagner's trajectory since leaving Brazil merely adds grist to this mill. When Wagner was moved to Europe by the Federal government of Brazil, he was told that he would be doing courses in hotel management. Instead, no steps were taken to regularize his status and he had to work illegally in a restaurant kitchen. Eventually with the help of a Brazilian union lawyer and Amnesty International, his status was legalized, and he remained in Europe for his protection, particularly as the charges against most of those that he identified as his assailants and/or participants in the Candelária massacre were dropped following the convictions of Marcos Vinícius Borges Emanuel and Nelson Oliveira dos Santos Cunha, and threats have been made against Wagner. Indeed, all cases regarding the Candelária massacre have now been archived.⁷

As a result of the two attempts on his life, Wagner suffers partial paralysis of his face, damaged hearing, chronic pain, and still has two bullets lodged in his head that are causing lead poisoning. He was recently declared handicapped as a result of his injuries and is no longer able to work, but as of late 2008 has yet to receive full and final compensation for his injuries, despite successfully petitioning against the Federal government of Brazil at the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. One happy outcome, however, was that thanks to some irresponsible coverage of one of the trials in which Wagner testified, he was reunited with his older sister, whom he had not seen in 15 years. They then traced two other sisters who had been adopted out of the family when they were still babies, and Wagner is in regular contact with his rediscovered family. Not all survivors of La Candelária have been so fortunate, however. According to Amnesty International, over half of the young people who lived in Candelária had died violently by 2001.⁸ The most famous of these tragic survivors is Sandro do Nascimento, who took bus passengers hostage in the Jardim Botânico area of Rio after a bungled robbery attempt on June 12, 2000, and was killed by a policeman in the car taking him to the police station after he had given himself up. The event was captured on television and eventually became the subject of the acclaimed 2002 documentary film, *Bus 174*.

When asked in London why he had come to talk at our workshop, Wagner explained that his “goal was to show things that are happening in the world and that people are not aware of. People are good. But we sit around in our houses, with our families, while other people are killing themselves. We don't know why these things happen, but if they are happening, it's good that a person, even when that person has a family, knows about it. . . . What I saw in the workshop is that people are worried about what is going on, with all this violence in Latin America, because if this kind of thing is happening

over there, one day it might happen over here.” Joining with Wagner, we hope that this volume will contribute in some small way to this critical endeavor of informing people about the tragic reality and consequences of youth violence.

Notes

1. The text we present is taken from an interview given by Wagner to Julia Rochester and which expands upon a video of the original LSE talk. We have carried out some editing in order to facilitate the text's readability.
2. A favela in Rio de Janeiro.
3. Wagner uses the term “students” to describe friends who went through the government's orphanage system, the *Fundação Nacional do Bem-Estar do Menor* (FUNABEM). Wagner's parents died when he was young and he spent much of his early life in the FUNABEM.
4. On the day of the massacre there had been a large demonstration near the Candelária church which had led to a lot of police patrolling the area.
5. “Come Gato” died a few days later.
6. The *Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*, or Special Police Operations Battalion.
7. A full discussion of the legal proceedings surrounding the Candelária massacre and Wagner's shootings, as well as obstruction of investigations by police and other organizations, can be found in Amnesty International's 2003 report, Rio de Janeiro 2003: Candelária and Vigário Geral 10 years on (AMR 19/015/2003), available online at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr190152003> (October 1, 2007).
8. Amnesty International, 2003, Rio de Janeiro 2003: Candelária and Vigário Geral 10 years on (AMR 19/015/2003), available online at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr190152003> (October 1, 2007), p. 13.

Chapter 1

Youth Violence in Latin America: An Overview and Agenda for Research

Dennis Rodgers and Gareth A. Jones

It is a little-noted fact that the world has recently undergone a momentous demographic transition, whereby almost half of the world's population is now under the age 25, with the overwhelming majority of these young people living in the developing world. The consequences of this situation are potentially enormous. As François Bourguignon, the World Bank's Chief Economist, pointed out at the press conference presenting the organization's 2007 World Development Report on the "Next Generation," "Such large numbers of young people living in developing countries present great opportunities, but also risks."¹ This World Bank report focuses mainly on the potential consequences of deficient education and skills training for a future work force, but there is also an increasingly widespread tendency to blame the so-called youth bulge for the rising levels of violence afflicting many parts of the developing world today (Goldstone 2001; Urdal 2007). Latin America is a case in point in this respect, with youth prominently associated with the region's high levels of violence, both as victims and perpetrators (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002; Koonings and Kruijt 1999, 2004; Weaver and Maddaleno 1999). Certainly, according to the United Nations' (UN) recently published *World Report on Violence against Children* (Pinheiro 2006: 357), Latin America suffers the highest regional youth homicide rate in the world. This trend is perhaps particularly evident in contemporary Central America; in El Salvador, for example, 93 percent of all homicide victims in 2005 were between 15 and 17 years old, while 15–24 year olds were deemed responsible for some 60 percent of all homicides in the same year (UNODC 2007).²

Although violence involving youth can take many other forms, including domestic abuse, attacks by death squads on street children and repressive juvenile justice systems,³ this situation has been largely blamed on the widespread and very visible regional youth gang phenomenon (Barnes 2007; Rodgers 1999).⁴ This is particularly the case in contemporary Central America, where gangs have come to the fore in an unprecedented manner during the past two decades (Arana 2005; Liebel 2004; Rodgers 2009).

Estimates of the total proportion of contemporary regional violence attributable to gangs vary widely from 10 to 60 percent (UNODC 2007: 64), as they have been accused of a whole slew of crimes and delinquency, ranging from mugging, theft, and drug dealing, to rape, assault, and kidnapping.⁵ There have even been attempts to link them to revolution and global terrorism. A 2005 U.S. Army War College publication contended that Central American gangs constituted a “new urban insurgency” that had as an ultimate objective “to depose or control the governments of targeted countries” through “*coups d’sstreet*” [sic],⁶ for example, while Anne Aguilera, head of the Central America office of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs branch of the U.S. State Department, asserted in an interview published in the Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* on April 8, 2005, that gangs were “the greatest problem for national security at this time in Central America” (cited in Bruneau 2005).⁷ Such concerns have legitimated a host of regional initiatives, including information sharing, secondment of police and military personnel, and the coordination of legislation, notably between Central America, Mexico, and the United States (Lara Klahr 2006).⁸

Although gangs are unquestionably a significant contemporary concern in the region, such sensationalist pronouncements—which are frequently echoed and fueled by the media (Briceño-León 2007; Huhn et al. 2006a; Penglase 2007)—suggest that they remain a profoundly misunderstood phenomenon. This is clearly partly due to the fact that both “youth” and “violence” are highly ambiguous categories. As Michael Taussig (1987: 241) points out, the latter is a “slippery” concept in that what counts as violence, and the meanings of such manifestations, can vary considerably within a given society, to say nothing of across cultures. To some extent, of course, most social scientists and policy makers can be said to rely on specific types of government compiled data—occasionally supplemented by reports from human rights groups—to capture the extent and nature of violence.⁹ Such data tend to reduce violence to criminal categories of homicide and assault, and therefore miss phenomenological understandings of violence as an action or an effect (Cuadra 2003; Whitehead 2004). Without more nuanced understandings of violence, there is a danger of “naturalizing” the phenomenon as a general human condition—in the case of youth gangs, perhaps particularly characteristic of young people (Collins 2008)—which is something that clearly obscures the intimate links violence has to power, for example, especially in relation to the state (see Arendt 1970).

The notion of “youth” is similarly by no means clear cut. Although the UN has defined “youth” as persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusive, some governments, such as those of El Salvador and Guatemala, bring the age limit down to 12 years, while in Mexico, the *Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud* pushes the category up to 29 years. Most researchers, however, would argue that what we understand as youth should include the sociocultural and institutional context, as well as individual attitudes, because even if “the experience of being young is universal, . . . it takes many different forms, partly cultural and political, partly personal” (Wulff

1995: 6). Indeed, according to Comaroff and Comaroff (2005), the category of “youth” is a sign that inherently disrupts simplistic Panglossian readings of progress, a collective noun that is applied to the unruly and excluded, a plastic term that is difficult to shake off, especially for those at the margins. At the same time, however, the boundaries separating “youth” status from “adult” status are both highly variable and arbitrary, often relating to an individual’s behavior patterns and activities, rather than his or her age, with individuals frequently not considered fully “adult” until they are seen to have taken on adult responsibilities and behaviors, for example. To this extent, as Pierre Bourdieu et al. (1986: 164) point out, the sociocultural category of “youth” is more of an ascribed social role than a physical state of being (see also Wyn and White 1997).

The ambiguities inherent to the issues of youth and violence have contributed to the particular slant of social science research on the topic in Latin America, something that is evident in relation to the gang phenomenon. Despite having long been a major topic of interest within the social sciences worldwide since the Chicago School of Sociology’s pioneering studies of the 1920s and 1930s—see for example, Thrasher (1927), Shaw and McKay (1942), or Whyte (1943)—gangs as a topic of study have only recently appeared as a systematic focus of the Latin American social sciences. Even if there exist a number of individual studies of gangs in almost every country in Latin America—including for example DeFleur (1970) on Argentina, Reguillo (1991) on Mexico, or Salazar (1990) on Colombia (for overviews, see Rodgers 1999; Strocka 2006)—such in-depth studies remain rare and isolated phenomena, and there are perhaps only two real *bodies* of research, respectively concerning gangs in Brazil and Central America (for reasons undoubtedly to do with the local importance of the issue).¹⁰ The present volume attempts to both deepen and broaden the coverage of study.

The Central American literature is clearly the most developed body of literature on Latin American gangs, partly because different studies are often carried out explicitly in conversation with others. The first in-depth investigation to focus specifically on gangs was Deborah Levenson’s (1988) pioneering research with the *Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala* (AVANCSO) on Guatemalan gangs, which Juan-Carlos Núñez (1996) drew on to conduct his early comparative research on gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and which also informed José Miguel Cruz and Nelson Portillo Peña’s (1998) study of gangs in El Salvador, as well as Leticia Salomón, Julieta Castellanos, and Mirna Flores’ (1999) study of gangs in Honduras. Similarly, the first ethnographic study of a Central American gang, carried out in Nicaragua in 1996–1997 by Rodgers (1997, 2000, 2007a), was built upon by Rocha (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005) during his own research on a different Managua gang in 1999–2000, with his results then taken up by Rodgers (2006a, 2007b) in order to calibrate new field research in 2002–2003, and further exchanges occurring for Rocha’s continuing research in 2005–2006 and Rodgers’ in 2007.¹¹ Since these early studies, there has been a proliferation of research by a range of investigators, including

Hume (2007a, 2007b), Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff (2003) in El Salvador, Castro and Carranza (2001) in Honduras, Vermeij (2006) in Nicaragua, and Winton (2004) and Merino (2001) in Guatemala. A multivolume overview study was published in the early and mid 2000s by a conglomerate of Central American research institutes (ERIC et al. 2001, 2004a, 2004b), but the research panorama remains relatively sparse, with new research occurring only very sporadically, although there is a proliferation of articles based on secondary literature as the topic becomes very much in vogue.¹²

Research on Brazil has proceeded somewhat differently. It is interesting to note that in Janice Perlman's classic *The Myth of Marginality* there was no index reference to gangs or violence, and the limited attention to crime is largely to discuss its low levels and focus on property (Perlman 1976). By the middle of the 1980s, however, especially building upon the work of Alba Zaluar (1983, 1994), violence and gangs became an important theme of research. This approach motivated a series of other studies of gang-drug industry relations in Rio and other Brazilian cities (Soares et al. 2005), as well as on the politics of violence and crime (Adorno et al. 1998; Soares et al. 1996). Paulo Lins, author of *Cidade de Deus* (The City of God, 1997), produced perhaps the most powerful work on gangs, drugs, and violence, based on interviews conducted through a project with Zaluar. Further important studies followed, including studies on the drugs trade and gangs (Leeds 1996), gangs and youth identities (Abramovay et al. 2002), the relationships and effects that gangs have on community (Arias 2004, 2006; Goldstein 2003; Pereira Leite 2005), and ethnographies of people in close proximity to gangs (Gay 2005). By the time Perlman conducted a return study of Rio in 2001, crime and in particular violence through gangs had become the defining feature of favela life, affecting community participation and organization, livelihoods, and poverty (Perlman 2006).

The uneven research situation vis-à-vis gangs in Latin America is mirrored more generally at the level of youth violence, which is clearly often talked about but less frequently researched. Indeed, the lack of systematic and comparative research on the topic was specifically singled out by the UN *World Report on Violence against Children* as the most important factor preventing the elaboration of a coherent and comprehensive regional research and policy agenda on the issue (Pinheiro 2006: 23). To a certain extent, however, the situation is also partly due to the difficulties inherent to identifying what is a "gang." Perhaps more so than any other region in the world, there exist a large number of labels in Latin America referring to institutions that could conceivably be classified as gangs: *pandillas* in Mexico and Nicaragua,¹³ *manchas* in Peru,¹⁴ *barras* in Argentina (DeFleur 1970; Kuasñosky and Szulik 1996, 1997), *quadrilhas* and *galeras* in Brazil (Zaluar 1994, 1997), *maras* in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Núñez 1996), or *chapulines* in Costa Rica (*Revista Centroamericana* 1994), to name but some examples. Comparing and contrasting between these different social forms is by no means easy, particularly considering that, as Herbert Covey (2003: 12) notes in his global survey of the gang literature, there is generally little in the way of a theoretical consensus

concerning gangs.¹⁵ Indeed, in many ways we have not improved substantially on Frederick Thrasher's (1927: 57) classic proposition that

a gang is an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.

At the same time, however, this is a definition that clearly covers a lot of ground. Certainly, it is well established that amongst the many practices of youth is the general tendency to congregate into peer groups and engage in collective behavior patterns; this is a universal aspect of the youth life cycle, during which young individuals learn to socialize and interact with their physical and social environment through the group, which provides definite referential parameters and behavioral codes (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Dubet 1987; Mead 1928).¹⁶ Sports and recreational clubs, friendship networks, and youth gangs all constitute different examples of such juvenile peer groups. While obviously conceptually distinct, many of these groups are interlinked and overlap considerably with each other, making them difficult to set apart in practice. Furthermore, although some of these groups do differ substantially from gangs, others can often also share many of the characteristics that Thrasher attributed to the latter in his definition: meeting face to face, "milling," displaying solidarity and group awareness, and attachment to a local territory can all apply to a football team or a close-knit group of neighborhood friends, for example.¹⁷

Perhaps the most widespread criteria considered to set youth gangs apart from other juvenile peer groups is their routine association with illegal and violent activities (Cohen 1990; Klein and Maxson 1989; Miller 1982; Spergel 1984; Vigil 1988).¹⁸ Of course, such behavior is not the exclusive preserve of youth gangs and their members. Other youth groups can be involved in such activities, although most frequently on a lesser scale and scope, as well as less regularly, than youth gangs. More generally, juvenile delinquency is obviously much more than just a youth gang phenomenon, even if there is evidence to suggest that being a member of a gang increases the likelihood of delinquent behavior (see Curry and Spergel 1988; Fagan 1990). What differentiates the illegal and violent behavior of youth gangs from that of other delinquent groups and individuals is that it is considered by wider society to be something inherent to the youth gang. Although other youth groups can be violent or engage in criminal enterprise, this behavior is generally not perceived as normative; it might be seen as induced by alcohol, or a form of temporary rebellion against authority, for example. Youth gangs, on the other hand, are often seen as violent and criminal "by nature." Engaging in collective criminal and violent behavior patterns is to this extent a defining feature. Thus, even if many instances of illegal and violent behavior attributable to members of youth gangs are actually committed individually, or in small groups of two

or three, rather than collectively (Erickson and Jensen 1977; Short 1968), they are considered to be causally linked to the fact of the perpetrator's or perpetrators' gang membership, and are therefore associated with the gang, rather than individual delinquency (Cohen 1990: 10; Miraglia 2005).

Such a conception of youth gangs is of course what underpins the widespread "criminalizing processes" that Jane and Peter Schneider (2008: 356) identify as perniciously shaping dominant modes of thinking about particular groups associated with criminal behavior patterns. The social sciences have put forward a variety of alternative approaches, the most influential of which is perhaps the "social ecology" argument, proposing that gangs are the result of the "social disorganization" of poor urban areas.¹⁹ Within this framework, youth gangs are conceived as partial replacement structures for institutions such as families that have become dysfunctional as a result of the "social disorganization" of poverty and social exclusion (Whyte 1943). Other important theories include cultural explanations of gangs as reflections of lower class "subculture" (Cohen 1955), political visions of gangs as forms of resistance to "blocked" opportunities (Cloward and Ohlin 1960), economic conceptions treating gangs as informal business enterprises (Sánchez Jankowski 1991), and psychological interpretations of gangs either as the result of gang members' deviant sociopathological personality traits (Yablonsky 1963), or else as vehicles for youth maturation processes and identity creation (Bloch and Niederhoffer 1958; Katz 1988).

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to attempt to consider which of these approaches is most persuasive, and as Ruth Horowitz (1990: 53) has moreover sensibly pointed out, to a large extent they correspond to "different dimensions of the gang experience that cannot be easily separated in practice." Seen from this perspective, it is arguably more fruitful to provide a sense of the varied intertwined factors that underlie the emergence of gangs (rather than trying to establish any kind of bottom-line determination) and to appreciate both the positive contributions of research on youth violence and gangs in Latin America, as well as its possible blind spots. At the same time, however, it is interesting to note that most of the preceding theoretical literature refers to U.S. gangs. This suggests the potential for obvious contrasts with the Latin America context. Certainly, although there are numerous similarities between the extant research in both parts of the world, there are arguably also some notable differences—at least of degree—emerging from Latin America research.

First, numerous studies underscore the interplay of gangs and youth violence in Latin America with other forms of social behavior and the formation of identities. As most studies note that the overwhelming majority of youth gang members around the world are male, it is unsurprising that many Latin Americanist scholars have related youth gangs to machismo and conceptualizations of masculinity (Barker 2005; Zubillaga and Briceño-Leon 2001). Masculine identities are manifest as both male-on-male and male-on-female violence, as well as the use of "beating-in" inductions of new gang members and the use of rape in the induction of female gang members (Hume 2004).²⁰ The

use of and iconography of tattoos, body piercings, and clothing styles and the lyrics to hip-hop are also associated with macho performances, extending cultural mores and adding explicit sexualized and violent overtones (Rocha 2003; Rubio 2007).²¹ As such indicate the difficult task of organizations working to affect male identities, including enhancing esteem as “fathers” or “workers,”²² and should also prompt us to question how far youth and gangs really do reflect what Hagedorn (2008) calls “resistance identities.” Moreover gangs’ uses of clothing, music, slangs, graffiti or tags, and other “cultural signs” are obviously vital to their identities (Cuerno 2000; Martel 2007), but also need to be appreciated as not inimical to youth sociability more generally (Castillo and Jones this volume). Finally, a number of studies have pointed to the role that ideas of “death” and religion play in relation to macho gang iconography and moral codes (see respectively Perea Restrepo 2007, and Alves 2002), as well as to religious conversion for young people leaving gang life and becoming *calmado* (see Riaño-Alcalá 2006; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003; Wolseth 2008).²³

A second notable contribution of research on Latin American gangs and youth violence is a critical focus on their social “embeddedness.” It is worth repeating that gangs and youth violence emerge from particular social contexts. The predominant interpretation of this gang-context relationship, however, is largely informed by the U.S. perspective, and stresses (or assumes) that gangs are the consequence of significant social disorganization. Hence, poverty, family breakdown, school dropout, and unemployment emerge time and again as likely predictors of gang membership, something that is seemingly only confirmed by signs of antisocial behavior including graffiti, vandalism, and open drug or alcohol use. Yet, while gangs are mostly associated with poorer neighborhoods, this is not exclusively the case as Portocarrero (1996) has explored for Peru.²⁴ Moreover, relationships between gangs and communities are often very strong and highly organized, if not necessarily with positive social and political outcomes (Zaluar 1997, 2000).²⁵ Arias (2006) and Pereira Leite (2005), for example, outline the negotiation and consequences of agreements between community leaders and gangs or leaders and police for violence management.²⁶ Similarly, an important set of studies reveal how communities can relate to gangs and violence (Arias 2004; Goldstein 2003; Rodgers 2000, 2006a), and also how gangs build reputations and extend their control through the enforcement of existing norms vis-à-vis certain criminal activities, domestic violence and child abuse, alcoholism, drug use, and property disputes (Arias and Davis Rodrigues 2006; Zaluar 2000). Indeed, gangs may organize to “defend” communities from outside incursion, construct networks with other gangs, and develop (hierarchical) structures for command and control (Dowdney 2005).

The nature of the social embeddedness of gangs is however clearly mutable. As some gangs have become more networked they have also become more mobile, for example.²⁷ The most obvious example are the *mara* gangs in Central America that have formed and reformed as a consequence of deportations from the United States. Many members have subsequently migrated “to return” north, becoming “transnational” or “global,” and disrupting

territorial loyalties and spatial identities (Reguillo 2005; Zilberg 2004, 2007). In a few cases, gangs of Latin American origin have emerged further afield as a result of migration, in Western and Southern Europe (Feixa et al. 2008; Hagedorn 2008). It is important however to distinguish between the flows of gang members, and the geographies of violence, and the “mobility” of the gang as an idea. As Reguillo (2005) has suggested, the *maras* have become central to a public imagination of fear, a convenient pariah or “other” easily called up to legitimate a host of anxieties and geopolitical responses. This is particularly obvious in relation to the infamous application of highly repressive antigang measures such as *Mano Dura* in Central America (González 2003; Hume 2007b; Lara Klahr 2006)—despite the fact that these are clearly not working (Aguilar 2006; Berkman 2005; see also Unger, this volume)—but also the growing extension of particular forms of “info-structure” for monitoring gangs, sometimes quite obviously, such as with the establishment of FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) offices in San Salvador or the new security provisions included in the 2008 Merida Initiative, or else more surreptitiously, through the specific targeting of USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and Millennium Challenge Funds donor flows to security-related projects, for example. An obvious question in this respect is to what extent the increased surveillance of Central America will extend to the rest of the continent, and how this will shape future societies in the region.

Partly for this reason, we feel that it is important to combine any analysis of a specific form of youth violence such as gangs with an exploration of various aspects of the juvenile justice systems that they encounter. In some parts of Latin America—Central America being a case in point—particular types of policies are arguably increasingly *the* key to understanding the critical shift that has occurred in the underlying nature of youth violence, which has become more violent and “disembedded” (see Rodgers et al. 2009). Seen from this perspective, particular forms of juvenile justice arguably embody deeper problems inherent within Latin American societies. Yet juvenile justice remains one of the Cinderella’s of regional and international attention to young people in Latin America. UN agencies such as UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) have not afforded juvenile justice priority status, while the UN Coordination Panel on Juvenile Justice, which consists of WHO (World Health Organization), UNICEF, and UNHCHR (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), has been largely ineffectual since its inception. Regional organizations such as the OAS (Organization of American States) and the Latin American Court for Human Rights have been more interested in reform of statute than ensuring practical interventions on the ground. Similarly, the rights agenda has had an uneasy relationship to juvenile justice—compared with the public discourses and agents lined up in other critical areas such as indigenous groups (“first rights,” cultural patrimony), natural resources and environment, gender, race, and disability. Rights have only percolated through to the juvenile justice system in Latin America, and been picked up by the media in the breach, that is, in their abuse (Macaulay 2007).

Of particular importance in this regard is the role played by the state (see Frühling et al. 2003). It is an oft repeated fallacy that contemporary violence in Latin America is now more social and economic in nature, compared to the political brutality of the past, with the spread of democracy and the decline of counterinsurgent state violence held up as an exemplification of this process. Yet even if ideological struggles between states and guerrillas have undoubtedly waned, countering youth violence, whether manifest as gangs, through involvement in criminal networks, or as individual actions of “delinquency,” retains the legitimation discourse of “defending” the state, the nation, and moral order (Huggins et al. 2002). The state therefore deploys resources against young people in extralegal forms, with impunity provided by tacit political support, a judicial system slanted in favor of the police and against victims’ relatives, and acquiescence to popular opinion that condones “order” outside the parameters of the “law” (see Brinks 2008; also Caldeira 2002; Holston and Caldeira 1998; Godoy 2006; Perea Restrepo 2004; as well as Denyer Willis, this volume).²⁸ The question of who controls the state and why they might be deploying its apparatus in such a manner clearly goes to the heart of the underlying dynamics of the new political economy of violence in contemporary Latin America (see Rodgers, 2009).

These are “big issues” in every sense that we feel particularly require detailed study if we are truly to get to grips with the dynamics of the contemporary youth violence phenomenon in Latin America. Of course, there are potentially many other underexplored avenues for research. We remain surprised about the paucity of gang research in the region related to “race” and ethnicity and gangs, for example. There are also relatively few studies that provide a detailed account of what might be termed gang “cosmologies,” that is, to say the multiple social, cultural, and historical repertoires they draw on, and how they both corrupt and reinvent them. The study of gangs as business organizations also requires greater tracing through both quantitative and qualitative studies; from knowing that few gang members are well off and that most get by, and that gangs may charge “taxes” on local business enterprises, there is little research indicating how the gangs legitimate business decisions, network with other organizations, and how the size and other characteristics of the gang may affect these rationale. Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, we know little about circumstances in which gangs do not emerge despite the “standard” conditions propitious to their doing so, nor how certain youth successfully resist becoming involved in gangs in areas affected by them. We also know little about how gangs subside.

We do not, however, wish to use this volume to map out a set of categorical statements, prognoses, or issues about the emergence of gangs and youth violence in Latin America. Indeed, neither in our own work nor in that of most contributors would such certainty be justified. Rather, we present this volume as a first step toward the elaboration of a more coherent and focused research agenda on contemporary Latin American youth violence, that seeks to draw on the insights of preceding studies while also thinking about the specific dynamics of the present. It does so by focusing on gangs and state-sponsored

systems of juvenile justice, but in as broad a fashion as possible, adopting different viewpoints and foci, and trying to draw links across different themes and issues. The current importance, both real and imagined, attributed to the gang phenomenon in Latin America makes it an inevitable center of attention, as is also the case of the infamous forms of juvenile justice that have been increasingly deployed in the region during the past decade. Yet gangs have existed in Latin America for many decades, even if—interestingly—the concern with “youth violence” is a recent one. Certainly, in a great many Latin American countries, there have been periods in the past where levels of violence have been extremely high, yet young people have not been its principal perpetrators or victims. Moreover, whereas Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and most of Central America are currently synonymous with gangs and violence, youth violence seems either much lower or much less documented elsewhere. To this extent, focusing explicitly on the contemporary gangs and the juvenile justice systems that they have engendered seem to us to constitute a potentially highly revealing lens through which to get to grips with the wider underlying processes that are currently shaping Latin American societies.

The volume is loosely organized into two parts. The first half is made up of studies that focus specifically on the dynamics of youth violence, considering violence as an action within social life, and most often in its gang or quasi-gang manifestation. The second half has contributions that focus on different interventions relating to youth violence by both the state, including the police, and civil society organizations. All of our contributors adopt or are sympathetic to ethnographic styles of analysis, getting as close as is feasible to the young people in gangs or to those most directly affected by their actions. As Daiute and Fine (2003) note, it is rare to read about youth violence from the perspective of youth themselves, and a number of authors have noted the paucity of studies drawing from primary research and conducted with young people in their territories rather than on “neutral ground” or in prisons (Huhn et al. 2006b; Liebel 2004; Moser and McIlwaine 2004). They suggest that there is a real need for studies to broaden out from a concern with youth behavior to youth subjectivity and experience, and to consider the context of institutions, relations, and symbolic media. Wagner’s story, which opens this volume, arguably does this in the most direct of manners, but most of the other contributions brought together in this collection can be said to attempt to do so as well.

Chapter 2 by Dennis Rodgers details the longitudinal evolutionary trajectory of Nicaraguan gangs between the 1990s and 2000s. Focusing specifically on a *pandilla* in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighborhood in Managua, the country’s capital city, he traces how it originated as a form of local social structuration in the face of broader conditions of high crime, insecurity, and sociopolitical breakdown and then changed significantly over the course of a decade from a form of collective social violence to a more individually and economically motivated type of brutality organized around a nascent drugs trade. At the same time, however, Rodgers relates this transformation to wider structural processes, which he describes as coming together and precipitating a form of “social death” in contemporary