

# Juvenile Gangs: Children of the Crisis

**Juvenile gangs have arisen as a side-effect of the crisis on deprived urban sectors. More than a passing fad, a way of dressing or a form of identity, these gangs are a way of responding to an environment, a means of becoming a part of it and rebelling and being recognized. This article provides an account of this relevant aspect of Mexican society today.**

The new juvenile gangs of the 80's, a social phenomenon that is a product of the acute contradictions of the system, came to the notice of Mexican public opinion in 1981. They already existed in the shadows and anonymity of the slums —or 'lost cities'— and the sensationalist press presented them as a yet another fashion with the name of '*los panchitos*' or '*los panchos*', legitimate sons of the megalopolis.

This new type of suburban juvenile gang —which is no mere fashion— arises more from the structural problems in our society. It is a product of the massive migrations from the country to the city, of unemployment and want, of the generalized economic crisis. It stems from the congestion in our society, the lack of opportunities and the imperative need to earn a living.

The 'lost cities', the poverty belts that circle round this huge city, are the territory of the new juvenile gangs. They are to be found everywhere —Tacubaya, Observatorio, Ixtapalapa, Neza-hualcoyotl, the Ajusco, Naucalpan and the Merced. But the phenomenon of the juvenile gangs is mainly evident in the suburban zones at the west of the city. A local newspaper estimated, in 1982, that the organized gangs in the area totalled around 300, comprising more than 4,000 children and youths, ranging in age from seven to 24.

In Santa Fé —situated at the west of the city and comprising 62 districts in the Alvaro Obregón Delegation— the topographical and ecological conditions, and the utilization of land are completely adverse: gorges, land undermined by sand extraction, puddles, rubbish dumps, unpaved breaches, and if that were not enough, a gunpowder factory, property of the National Defence. Here, where the human habitations are improvised with wood, rubber, wires, cardboard and tin, where the public services are almost inexistent and the streets have been self-planned, with the help and organization of the inhabitants themselves, here is the territory of the '*Panchos*'.

The number of gangs that exist on the periphery of the city cannot be calculated exactly, since their continual appearance, disappearance and division impossibilitate numerical control. Nevertheless, we know of the existence of gangs in the whole Republic and of gangs operating in towns neighboring the city, but still outside of the 'lost cities' —as is the case of the gangs in Cuajimalpa, formed by groups of 30-50 members and known as the Country Funks.

Since their appearance all the gangs are known as '*Los*

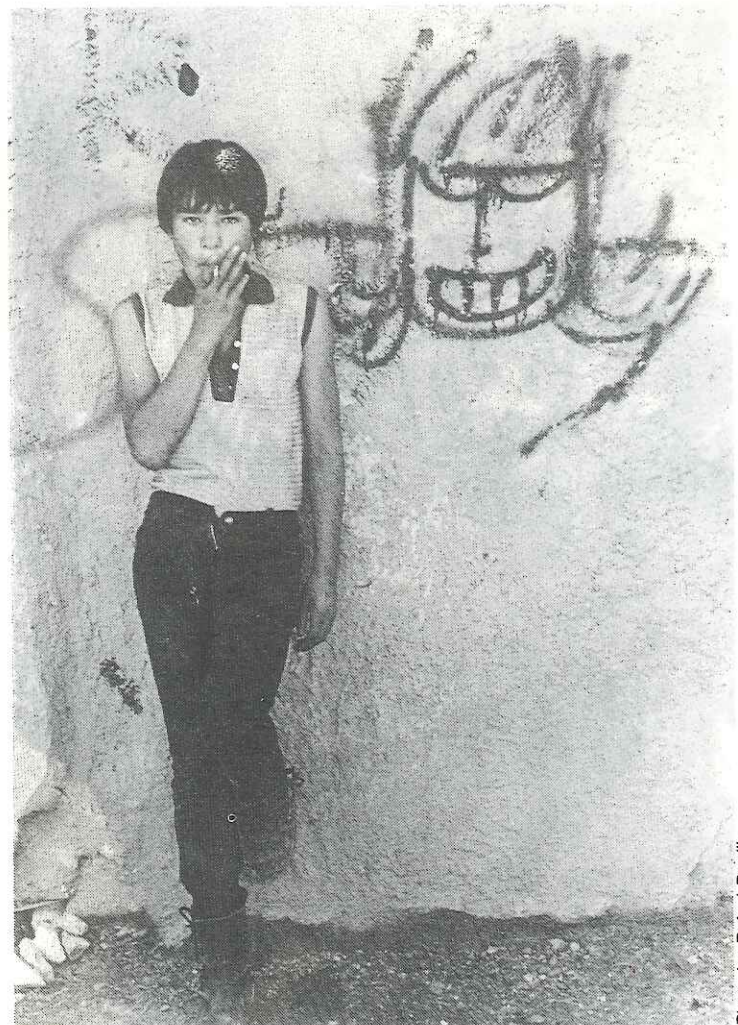
*Panchos*', but in reality the repertory of gangs and names is very varied: The Gophers, The Stains, The Nazis, The Monkeys, The Warriors, The Smurfs, The Sex Castrators (an all-female gang), The Savages, etc.

Systematic harassment by the police, and violence perpetrated against the gangs has provoked violent demonstrations, fights and holdups, which can all be seen as a direct threat to established order. Consequently the Police Department initiated an urgent Security Program, to eradicate juvenile gangs, which involved raids and more vigilance in the poorer neighborhoods.

## "We Are Violence Itself"

The gang serves as a means of cohesion. It is also the way in which these adolescents feel integrated into the community that protects them. They are the Boy's Band. Their appearance breaks with all the juvenile stereotypes. "We are violence itself", they have declared in a graffiti. Effectively, violence and the urge to be different is present in their gestures, movements, words, their dress. They define themselves as punk, but not as an imitation of English punk. To the gang, to be punk is to be young, restless and violent, to be disorder itself and not to be blind to the neighborhood's problems.

## "I'm not writing protest music, I am the protest"



Member of the Santa Fe gang.

Photo by Rafael Bonilla



In its formal aspect the gang uses leather jackets with pins, buttons and zippers, odd and original hairstyles, old torn jeans, preferably narrow, a t-shirt with the slogan, Sex Pistols, and high-topped tennis shoes. The gang consists of 15 to 30 'chavos' (guys) and the 'cotorreo' (chatter) is the essential part of their reason for being. They meet to talk, to take drugs, to go to a 'tocada' (party cum rock session)— that's the 'cotorreo'.

The juvenile gangs are composed in their majority of males, but there are mixed gangs with a higher percentage of males, and there are also all-female gangs, although in smaller proportion. The formation of female gangs has met with greater problems since girls tend to be more controlled by their families. At this social level, belonging to a gang implies a break with the family. In the female gangs the conflicts generated from being a woman, belonging to a gang and to a certain social class are accentuated. In the mixed gang, female participation is impeded by the unadulterated *machismo* on the part of the masculine members of the gang.

Since the beginning, gangs have identified with rock. Many gangs take the name of some famous rock band for theirs: Pistols, Doors, Scorpions, etc.

Although it is true that not all the juvenile gangs are drug-addicts, alcohol, fights, hold-ups and drugs are all associated with gang-life. Marijuana, alcohol and 'chemo'(glue) are the most common.

Drug-consumption inside the gangs has been, for obvious reasons, one of the most apparent and, at the same time, one of the most manipulated and hidden, aspects. The declaration of one punk speaks for itself, "If we sniff (inhale glue) it's because the glue takes away our hunger, it's not so much because we want to do it." In the same way as some gangs adopt the names of famous rock groups, others take the name of some

drug: The Flexis (Flexo, contact glue), the Fz-5000 (combination of two types of industrial glue).

### The Germ of the Organization

The graffiti are live proof of the trail of the gangs through the streets. They are symbols of power, rivalry, alliance between the gangs.

"We are more anti-social than political. I'm not writing protest songs: I'm the protest." (*La Pared*, No.2, Oct.1983).

The image of the boy's gang is one of violence, vice, inactivity and the total lack of political conscience. Nevertheless one can observe the germ of organization in some juvenile gangs. In many of the poorer districts the organization of the youths alongside the general population is a concrete fact.

"I'm fed up with you shouting at me." (Graffiti in *Santa Fé*).

Repression of juvenile gangs in the deprived areas, their bad press image and the need for a united front, for protection and the need for internal and external investigation led, in 1981, to the formation of the Youth Council (CPJ) which attempts to approach the numerous gangs with suggestions of mutual aid. The immediate objectives of the CPJ are to combat gang violence and drug-taking. Nevertheless, the principal objective is to develop the gang's perception of life around them.

With the formation of the CPJ the levels of violence and drug-addiction in the gangs lowered considerably. It seems that the level of drug-addiction lowered, in 1982, by 15%. As far as police repression towards the gangs is concerned, this apparently has not decreased.

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### In the gang, punk is young, restless and violent.

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By that time the country's economic crisis had deepened and this became an obstacle to the organization of the CPJ, and for this reason the National Council of Resources for Youth (CREA) —through its Emergency Work Protection Program— and the Coordinating Commission of the Higher Education Students Social Service (COSSIES) acted as channels of communication between the gangs and the State, and initiated activities to stimulate and resolve the needs of the juvenile gangs. CREA began a program of Voluntary Social Service to redirect youth's energy towards its own community, and in the Santa Fé area they authorized 100 scholarships for Community Service activities. At the same time the CPJ nominated a coordinator in CREA.

The Social Service Program implemented by the CREA in Santa Fé included brigades of students of different disciplines (doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc.) according to the specific needs of each area, and 100 social workers designed for community service. Unfortunately lack of resources on the one hand and the absence of a real commitment and solidarity on the part of the volunteers on the other, resulted in the program's partial failure.

The policy adopted by the state towards the juvenile gangs is one of a search for radical solutions that will control and attack deprivation. So the Police Department and the Federal District have begun rehabilitation courses in carpentry, ironwork, driving, etc. to help the deprived youth to aid his community and to be re-integrated into society.

Irma Suárez



Photo by Rafael Bonilla

Girl of the gangs.