THE CHALLENGE OF ACCULTURATION IN A MEXICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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Division of Criminal Justice
Abstract

of

THE CHALLENGE OF ACCULTURATION IN A MEXICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

by

Harol Jonatan Pineda Chavez

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore factors that explain how ethnic identity and culture conflict is shaped and developed within a group of Mexican-American men living in Sacramento, California. These factors include: Personal (Individual risk factors), Family risk factors, Peer risk factors, Education (School risk factors), and Neighborhood location (Community risk factors). The study employs in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews focusing on the above risk factors, acculturation, and multiple marginality of approximately eighteen male participants. The participants were between the ages of eighteen and thirty years old. These responses are the data upon which grounded theory methods of qualitative data analysis were employed to analyze how ethnicity, acculturation, culture conflict, and marginalization influence this subgroup of Mexican-Americans.
Review of the literature

This chapter gives a brief background to the history of gangs in the United States. Additionally, the chapter highlights the negative effects of gang membership, and the primary risk factors associated with such association. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how such risk factors affect Mexican-American’s acculturation, ethnic identity, and it leads to Vigil’s concept of multiple marginality.

Analysis

The data were collected from interviews with eighteen participants. Data were analyzed utilizing a system of ‘line-by-line’ coding to generate themes from the interviews. A review of literature identified certain risk factors: acculturation, culture, education, family, individual, peers, and community issues as significantly influential on Mexican-Americans who joined or affiliate with gangs. The face-to-face interviews revealed that most of the participants’ verified assertions from the literature, suggesting that factors such as these play a significant role in social development and perhaps even encourage engagement in crimes, deviance, and affiliation with gangs. The literature supports the impact of culture conflict and Vigil’s (1988) multiple marginality on these Mexican-American community members.
Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Due to my own experience and where I grew up, I also had assumptions about being Mexican-American, and had similar experiences, as did many of these participants. These participants faced many challenges related to their families, peers, culture, and their first language. However, in spite of any short-comings these experiences caused, they highlighted the importance of the neighborhoods (geographical location) where they grew up, as strongly influencing whether they were involved with criminal activity, deviancy, and gang affiliation. Overall, their responses were more focus on the negative effects of acculturation with very few positive examples that are highlighted in the advantage of being bilingual. The results cannot be generalized beyond the current research as the data were derived from a small, non-probability convenience sample and are not likely to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Mexican-American ethnic identity and culture conflict issues in the United States. However, collecting data from a larger sample would improve validity and generalizability.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Daniel Okada, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
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First, I would like to express my deep gratitude and love for my mother. She has guided me throughout this long path with her example of perseverance and giving it her all in all that she did and continues to do even when she is not among us anymore. My mother paved the way for me and my sister to strive for a higher education, to fight for what we want and to never give up. I would also like to thank my father who taught me that hard work will always pay off, one way or another, and for the hard work he did himself to provide for me and my family. I am also grateful to my sister for being part of this journey as well; she always provided words of encouragement and never let me down during my most challenging days.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>Page viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Research Problem</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background of Gangs</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Membership and Negative Effects</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Effects</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Association Risk Factors</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (Individual Risk Factors)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Risk Factors</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Risk Factors</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (School Risk Factors)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Location (Community Risk Factors)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acculturation, Ethnic Identity, and Multiple Marginality………………………37
Summary/Conclusion…………………………………………………………….47
3. METHODOLOGY……………………………………………………………….49
   Overview………………………………………………………………………..49
   Population of Study and Sample Access…………………………………….50
   Setting……………………………………………………………………………51
   Data Collection…………………………………………………………………52
   Limitations……………………………………………………………………..54
4. ANALYSIS……………………………………………………………………….55
   Language…………………………………………………………………………55
   Education (School Risk Factors)……………………………………………….57
   Family…………………………………………………………………………….60
   Emotionally…………………………………………………………………….61
   Culture Conflict and Ethnic Identity…………………………………………65
   The Importance of Acculturation………………………………………………73
   The Influence of Peers…………………………………………………………..78
5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS………………84
   Discussion………………………………………………………………………84
   Conclusions……………………………………………………………………88
   Recommendations…………………………………………………………….89
Appendix A. Informed Consent Form………………………………………………90
Appendix B. Interview Questions………………………………………………….92
Appendix C. Sub Identity by Risk Factor.................................................................96

References..............................................................................................................97
Chapter 1

Introduction

Gangs in the United States are a major contemporary problem that affect society at many levels; particularly in communities, on the street, and in the criminal justice system. Gangs engage in excessive violence and diverse illicit activities. Many neighborhoods have become imperiled because of the presence of drugs and crimes. Such exposure, in many cases, has led to and been caused by gang membership. Hispanic street gangs specifically have proliferated, and contribute to the number of Hispanic inmates in prison.

Rodriguez (2005) argues that, “Strikingly, in the early 1970s, California had 15,000 prisoners in 13 institutions, compared to 165,000 prisoners in close to 35 institutions today” (p. 18). In 2013, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation reported in their census, that 53,449 (32.9%) male inmates identified as Hispanic. Available literature suggests that gang affiliation and violence resulted in the United States House of Representatives passing the ‘Gangbusters Bill’ in 2005, which changed various gang-related violent offenses into federal crimes, and imposing mandatory sentences of 10 years to life for gang-related convictions. In addition, it sustained the death penalty by supporting and allowing the prosecution of 16-17-year-old gang members as adults for federal crimes (Rodriguez, 2005). However, Roper v. Simmons (2005) eliminated the death penalty for minors, citing that is unconstitutional to impose the death penalty for crimes that were committed when the person was under the
age of 18 years old. Nevertheless, the main purpose of the ‘Gangbusters Bill’ was to remove gangbangers from the streets, yet it has contributed to the increase in the prison population.

With the large number of Hispanics in prison, in particular Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, several of the most dangerous and deadliest gangs in the US, were founded inside correctional institutions and have spread their influence across the country into different prisons, jails, detention centers, juvenile halls, and ultimately to our communities. Gangs such as the Mexican Mafia originated inside a California prison as a means of protecting these inmates from victimization from white and black prison gangs. Other Mexican-American street gangs were founded as a mechanism for those who share similar traits such as culture, language, and struggles with acculturation and marginalization with mainstream American society. As a result, their failure to acculturate played a major role in their becoming part of a gang.

According to Vigil (2002), street gangs mainly develop in low-income ethnic minority neighborhoods and no ethnic community has been exempt from such problem; however, the Mexican-American community is one that has been affected the most. Gangs are a major problem for society in different aspects since it appears that the lack of opportunities and struggles gang members encounter growing up have propelled them to engage in crime and affiliate with gangs.
Statement of Research Problem

California is the most populated state in the United States, with the biggest agriculture market and the most industrialized sector. The state also has the largest number of foreign immigrants of which the majority come from poor Mexican backgrounds (Rodriguez, 2005). Due to agriculture, mainly poor immigrants particularly with Mexican backgrounds, have settled in the Central Valley. Those who have attained any type of formal education or training in a professional field have greater chances to find a job and settle in more industrialized areas such as the Silicon Valley or a metropolitan area such as Los Angeles.

Rodriguez (2005) explains that California receives tens of thousands of immigrants annually mainly from Mexico, Central America, the Pacific Rim, and even Russia. This migration has created a socioeconomic structure in the state that is composed of various layers with the poorest being agriculture workers up to the professionals who are, “computer-literate foreign students and workers, to the extremely wealthy, who are tied to the media, entertainment, energy and technology industries” (p. 13).

Hispanics in the US are the fastest growing minority group, and because of their economic status and mainstream cultural marginality, have experienced significant exposure and opportunity for gang affiliation (Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011). Hispanics have the highest proportion of incarcerated and gang affiliates, and some
of the most powerful gangs on the streets and behind prison walls are run by those from Mexican backgrounds. Gangs such as ‘La EME’ (Mexican Mafia) originated in prison, and later spread to the streets (Hagedorn, 2005).

Known as ‘La EME’ because of the letter M in Spanish, and the thirteen letter of the alphabet, members of the Mexican Mafia often celebrate the number 13 with the letter M as their symbols (Valentine, 1995). The Mexican Mafia was founded in 1956 at the Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy, California, the original founders were all US citizen Mexican-Americans, not Mexican nationals (Valdez, 2000). The Mexican Mafia and other Mexican-American gangs have incorporated a sense of fashion and style that extends beyond its members, which includes colors (primarily red and blue), oversize pants, baseball caps, bandanas, and tattoos that have religious images or names of family or slain gang members. Many youngsters living in the ‘barrios’ or marginalized Mexican-American communities grew up adopting this style as a way to fit in or define an identity.

Lopez and Brummett (2003) suggest that gang membership serves as a way of establishing an identity; therefore, many Mexican-Americans embrace their culture of origin when they are struggling to form their place in society. By embracing their cultural heritage, many individuals encounter conflicts that affect their ability to acculturate into the American mainstream. For example, problems with racism, prejudice, and mockery due to speaking Spanish, having an accent, eating certain foods, listening to Mexican music, and even the way they dress affect acceptance. In some cases, Mexican cultural identity has created issues in defining mainstream identity due to having less exposure to
their native culture. Some may have physical features and even names reflecting their Mexican heritage, yet they are still conflicted with their ethnic identity.

According to Valdez (2000), “The Mexican Mafia chose and still chooses its members based on their practice of the Mexican gang culture” (p. 54). The Mexican gang culture incorporates diverse styles from how an individual dresses, to his type of haircut, and his use of certain Spanish, or ‘Spanglish’ slang words, favored by Mexican-American gang members. In addition, those who are part of this culture are those who embrace all those characteristics, which for many, are critical in Mexican culture.

One example of an individual who practiced the Mexican culture but was not from a Mexican background was Joe ‘Pegleg’ Morgan who was recruited by the Mexican Mafia in 1970 and despite being of Slavic decent, “spoke, read, and wrote Spanish fluently. Raised in Los Angeles, he took pride in the Mexican heritage” (Valdez, 2000, p. 55). According to Valdez (2000), feared by many, Morgan, aka ‘Pegleg’, was a member of a Mexican street gang before joining the Mexican Mafia, and had a reputation of being brutal, ferocious, and was much respected in and out of the correctional system. One can conclude that the environment where Morgan grew up, significantly influenced his identity in the same manner that occurs with Mexican-Americans who are raised in the barrios or other marginalized neighborhoods. In addition, the Mexican Mafia is an example of how Mexican-Americans show their pride regarding their heritage since it was founded by US citizens and who recruit new members based on their cultural practices, and who are proud of being Mexican despite having been born in the US.
According to Miller, Barnes & Hartley, (2011) “Gang membership among Hispanic adolescents has been situated in a sociocultural context of ethnic identity and structural isolation” (p. 333). Among Hispanics, involvement is often related to blocked societal opportunities due to their minority status. The social isolation many immigrants face when they arrive in the US, and the rejection that many Mexican-Americans feel in their own communities’, impact behavior since marginalization contributes to gang affiliation as a means of alleviating this alienation. One of the main reasons why some Mexican-Americans feel isolated in their own communities’ is because of the rejection they experience throughout society despite being American born citizens they are still treated as second-class citizens. These feelings of rejection result in further marginalization that proliferates in the Mexican-American community where, “Factors such as difficult economic conditions and poverty, discrimination, exclusion from mainstream society, marginalization, hopelessness, negative social influence, and disorganized communities marked by multiple social problems contribute to what Vigil refers to as multiple marginality” (Freng et al. 2012, p. 449).

Vigil (1988) claims that multiple marginality represents the various disadvantages experienced by Mexican-American families and their children in contemporary American society. The origins of multiple marginality can be found in the historical experiences of those of Mexican descent in the United States where they and other immigrants were segregated into the unwanted barrios (neighborhoods) (Miller et al., 2011). Multiple
marginality incorporates the effects of ‘barrio life’, low socioeconomic status, street socialization, acculturation, and problems developing a self-identity (Vigil, 1988).

Gangs provide economic and psychological support for their members. For “Mexican American youth involved with gangs, choloization [gang affiliation] serves as the primary mechanism by which their ethnic identity is embraced and displayed” (Millet et al., 2011, p. 335). Choloization is the outcome of culture conflict for Mexican-Americans and describes the struggle to form a personal identity. As a result, those who are alienated or stressed, associate with gangs to develop their own identity since they find peers with whom they can relate (Lopez & Brummett, 2003). The need for protection, the ability to earn an income, or even to follow a family tradition are justifications for gang membership (Melde et al., 2012). Lachman, Roman, and Cahil (2013) suggest that personal benefits such as prestige and status are also relevant.

Many ethnic prison gangs originated as a means of protection and to unite those individuals from similar ethnic backgrounds. Street gangs where created to protect turf, and some have developed into criminal organizations and serve as a support system where members can identify with their culture of origin as they struggle to assimilate into American society. The failure to acculturate plays a significant role in joining a gang.

Hispanics are known to have strong ties to their families; therefore, their families influence their decision making as the family also provides emotional and financial support (Krohn et al. 2011). Mexican and Chicano (Mexican-American) gangs have been around for approximately 80 years, “bound together by culture, tradition, as sense of
identity with family and neighborhood, and loyalty” (Valentine, 1995, p. 19). A natural urge to feel a sense of belonging, such as with friends and family, is a main contributing factor, which causes Mexican-Americans to join gangs.

Within ethnicity based gangs, the majority of members share similar cultural ties. It is through this common ground that a gang can be used as a replacement for friends and family by imitation of the atmosphere of their culture. Immigrants arrive to the US with unique cultural traditions that clash with the dominant group, in this case Euro-Americans. Each incoming immigrant group experiences a unique process of integration where economic conditions, and community and neighborhood influences affect their assimilation into their new culture.

Compared to other ethnic and immigrant groups, Mexican-Americans have encountered unique experiences in the US. Immediately following the US-Mexican War (1848) and with the annexation of the northern part of Mexico which makes up southwest US, Mexican residents living in this area, became minorities in their own homes, and were excluded from politics, economic, and social institutions (Vigil, 1988; Lopez & Brummett, 2003). This led to racial and class hostilities that deeply influenced the conditions of Mexican-American assimilation, and the status of subsequent generations of Mexican immigrants (Vigil, 1998).

Mexican-American gangs are long-term organizations and embedded in Mexican-American communities. Their culture has remained current while other ethnic groups have experienced culture disintegration as they assimilated into mainstream American society.
Mexican-Americans reinforced and even updated their traditional cultural practices due to the continuous immigration of more Mexicans seeking a better life north of the border (Vigil, 1988).

For Crouch (2004), culture serves as a way to identify those who are like us and it could serve as an aid for protection from those who are not like us or who may provoke harm against us. In addition, culture serves as a vehicle to communicate that we are part a particular group, and that we share a general understanding of the same norms and religious practices. “Culture is as much a survival mechanism as is our ability to make weapons or to take flight from danger” (Crouch, 2004, p. 21). For Mexican-Americans like any other minority it gives the impression that their culture of origin can be used to fight against adversities encountered by marginalization. However, Mexican-Americans possess a distinction compared to other minorities which is their unique Mexican culture. While their culture is very diverse, it incorporates a mixture of traditions that have their roots in its native cultures such as the Aztecs. For example, there are numerous words that are derived from Nahuatl the language spoken by the Aztecs, which are now incorporated into Spanish and English. Some of those words are tomatoes, coyotes, and ocelots, which are native to a particular region of Mexico (Crouch, 2004). In addition, there is a strong influence from European conquistadors who brought their religion (Catholicism) and language (Spanish), to Mexico and has shaped the lives of most who embrace the Mexican culture. The practice of some traditions such as Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a clear example of the fusion of Catholicism that embraces the souls and ancient Aztec
rituals that honor the dead. Despite its European influence, many Mexicans have greater pride in their indigenous roots, as they display tattoos that symbolized ancient Aztec warriors, Gods, calendars, or symbols. Mexican culture can be viewed as a fusion of both European and Pre-Columbian cultures where both influences were combined to develop a unique culture that has transcended into the US. For many, it plays a key role in their daily lives since it incorporates a language, religion, fashion, music, and a great variety of foods, and festivities.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore factors that explain how ethnic identity and culture conflict is shaped and developed within a group of Mexican-American men living in Sacramento, California. This study examines the multiple risk factors that, according to the literature, impact the development of Mexican-American identity and potential gang involvement. Risk factors of: acculturation, culture, education, family, individual, peers, and community features influence Mexican-Americans in nurturing their ethnic identity, and may lead to culture conflict issues that may cause deviancy, drug use, and gang affiliation. In an effort to understand the effect of culture conflict among Mexican-Americans, interviews were conducted with 18 Mexican-American males living in Sacramento California. These interviews reflect the effects of ethnic identity, the impact of culture conflict, and the impact of marginality that participants encountered.
**Definition of Terms**

It is important to identify and define the most significant terms used in this study. These definitions should facilitate understanding of the narrative as these terms present a context and help explain certain identity characteristics.

*Acculturation:* A process “wherein two distinct cultures come into contact resulting in significant changes in one or both” (Miller et al., 2011, p. 333). Also, it is the cultural adjustment of a non-native person or a group of people adapting or borrowing traits from another culture in order to assimilate into the chosen culture. In addition, a unification of two distinct cultures as a consequence of continued contact in which a person acquires the non-native culture is produce due to this exposure.

*Barrio:* Spanish for neighborhood, ghetto, a geographic residential area.

*Chicano:* A person of Mexican ancestry born in the United States.

*Cholo:* A native Mexican or Mexican-American who is actively a member of a gang. The term, “has its roots in the early Spanish colonial period” (Miller et al., 2011, p. 333). Over the years the word has evolved to identify or represent Mexican or Mexican-American gang members, or anyone who dresses like a member of a gang. The term is derived from the Spanish word ‘solo’ meaning alone and is linked to the isolation that natives experienced during the colonial period, it is also, “a distinctive street style of dress, speech, gestures, tattoos, and graffiti” (Lopez & Brummett, 2003; Vigil, 1988, p. 2).
Choloization: “is a syncretic process—that is, a mixing and blending of cultures to create a new culture or subculture, sometimes in an erratic way—it has resulted in a variety of characteristics that reflect the Chicano gang subculture in terms of organization, structure, values and norms, and social and cultural habits” (Vigil, 2002, p. 44).

Gang: An organized group of individuals who engages in criminal activities, composed of individuals who share interests, identify with a particular ethnicity, and who live in the same neighborhood where the influence of crime is present.

Gang member: An individual who is a part of a gang and embraces this membership by displaying certain tattoos, wearing of certain colors, and engaging in illicit activities for the benefit of the gang.

Gang affiliate: Someone who associates with gang members on a regular basis and may also engage in illicit activities for the gang, yet has not been initiated as an official member.

Mexican: A person who was born in Mexico, or who identifies as Mexican despite being born outside of Mexico.

Mexican-American: For the purpose of this study a Mexican-American is anyone fully or partially of Mexican heritage born in the United States.

Mexican Culture: A mixture of native pre-Columbian influences (Aztecs, Mayans, Zapotecs) with an additional strong influence of Spanish heritage including language and religion (Catholicism).
Multiple Marginality: The disadvantages experienced by Mexican-American families and their children in contemporary American society (Vigil, 1988).

Pochito. A derogatory term used by native-born Mexicans to refer to Mexican-Americans who lack fluency in Spanish, which implies that they are not Mexican enough.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Youth gangs can be found as early as the 14th century in Europe; however, it was not until the 19th century that gang activity was reported in the United States. There are a variety of reasons why anyone joins a gang. Some of the most common are for protection from rival neighborhood gangs or following in the footsteps of family members or friends (Melde, Diem & Drake, 2012). Culture also plays a considerable role in influencing and promoting gang affiliation with immigrants living in the United States. According to Miller, Barnes, and Hartley (2011), those who are less assimilated into mainstream Western society have greater potential to join gangs. Lachman, Roman and Cahill (2013) suggest that personal benefits such as prestige and status are inducements for joining a gang.

Historical Background of Gangs

Howell and Moore (2010) note that gangs have been documented since the seventeenth century in many Western civilizations, although there is speculation that gangs may have existed during the fourteenth century or as early as the twelfth century; however, there are significant differences between contemporary street gangs and those from previous epochs. Contemporary gangs are known to have features that demonstrate greater more organization, violence, and engagement in more serious criminal activities. For example, in 1600s, structured gangs such as the ‘Mims, Hectors, Bungles, and Dead
Boys’ first appeared in London, where they intimidated the local communities by engaging in acts of vandalism. The first appearance of street gangs in the United States was on the East Coast after the American Revolution in 1783. According to Howell and Moore (2010) the most accessible evidence reports that it not was until the nineteenth century when more serious street gangs appeared.

In the early eighteenth century, there was a strong association with gang members coming from lower classes, and from various ethnic groups immigrating into the United States. New immigrants lived in identifiable communities where language often established barriers that isolated them from mainstream society. Individuals who joined gangs found a connection that could provide them with opportunities for camaraderie and amusement (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2003). Gangs in the Northeast and Midwest were the product of two migration waves predominantly of poor Europeans migrating to urban areas. Contrastingly, gangs in the West developed from the already established Mexican communities and culture in the area, and the continuous south to north migration of Mexican and other Latinos into those areas. A third wave of immigrants composed of African Americans migrated to the North and West from the deep rural South following the lure of better paying jobs in more urban environments (Howell & Moore, 2010).

Gang activity exploded across the United States in the later 20th century and led to extensive research and analysis concerning problems associated with gangs (O’Brien, Daffern, Chu, and Thomas, 2013). Akiyama (2012) reports that according to the Office of Juvenile and Delinquency Prevention of the Department of Justice, gang violence is a
major problem across those states where youth gangs have been identified, and there are
nearly 24,500 identified gangs in the United States with approximately 750,000 members
having ethnic backgrounds composed of 45% Hispanic/Latino, 31% African American,
13% Caucasian, 7% Asian, and 2% of other mixed ethnic backgrounds.

_Northeast_

There are three periods identifying the development of street gangs in the
Northeast. During the first period, after the conclusion of the American Revolution in
1783, New York City experienced an influx of immigrants, which is associated with the
first gangs in the United States. These immigrants were not experienced criminals, but
simply youngsters fighting over the territory with other immigrant and native-born youth
who lived in adjacent areas (Howell, Egley, Tita, & Griffiths, 2011). The second period
marked the beginning of more serious and dangerous street gangs whose emergence is
attributed to the extensive migration of Europeans. The gangs that arose during this
period were more dangerous and organized than earlier versions since they begin to use
more violence in order to protect and defend their turf from the invasion of new
immigrants. The third period framed the 1950s and 1960s, and was marked by the arrival
of Latino and African Americans to major northern and western U.S. cities (Howell &
Moore, 2010).
Midwest

The first street gangs in the Midwest were composed of Caucasian males in Chicago around 1860 before the American Civil War; however, it would take approximately another twenty years before street gangs made a major impact on the region (Howell & Moore, 2010). Between 1870 and 1890, Irish immigrant gangs robbed, fought, and terrorized Poles, Germans, and Jewish immigrants who settled in their neighborhoods (Howell & Moore, 2010). Howell et al. (2011) note that some of the first gangs in the Midwest primarily in Chicago, were composed of Poles and Italians; however, recognized violent street gangs did not emerge until the 1960s, and were mainly black gangs.

By the 1930s, Chicago saw a second phase of gang growth attributed to the increased northern migration of Mexicans and African Americans to industrial job opportunities in Midwest cites. African American immigrants had first arrived in large number at the end of the Civil War as they attempted to escape the hostile environments found in the Jim Crow Southern states (Howell & Moore, 2010). Between 1919-1939 the first wave of Mexican immigrants came to Chicago. Fleeing conflict brought on by the Mexican Revolution, these first groups of Mexican immigrants were encouraged by the prospects of new employment opportunities outside of Mexico (Howell & Moore, 2010).

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Black Gangster Disciple Nation, the Latin Disciples, the Latin Kings, and the Vice Lords were the most widely recognized gangs in Chicago and combined to have approximately 19,000 members. They were also
found to be responsible for about 70% of street gang related crimes and roughly for more than 50% of street gang related homicides (Howell & Moore, 2010). Urban renewal projects led to the demolition of low-income housing units, forcing some of these gangs to move to the suburbs or across state lines to other Midwest regions such as Indiana and Wisconsin spreading Chicago style ‘gangsterism’ (Howell & Moore, 2010).

Simultaneously, as gangs spread across in the Midwest, gangs also appeared in the West.

West

The earliest reports of gangs in the West date to the 1890s. Howell and Moore (2010) suggest that the pioneers of Latino/ Hispanic gangs in the West were La Palomilla (male cohort), a group composed of young Mexican men who engaged in this ‘traditional male cohort’ as a way to socialize in Southern Texas. According to Rubel (1965), La Palomilla represents an ‘ego-centric’ relationship of a group of males who network on a regular basis. The spread of gangs in this region can be associated with a migration route, that initiated in Mexico and following a route from El Paso, Texas, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and finally to Los Angeles, California. Such routes were a ‘well-traveled road’ carrying gang culture from America to Mexico and Central America and back to the north (Howell et al., 2011). The pachuco (zoot suiter) style originated in El Paso, Texas; however, there is evidence that shows that can be traced to the state of Pachuca in Mexico since this city is known for males wearing baggy pants which is part of the unique pachuco style (Vigil, 1988).
Gangs can be found in the Mexican states of Michoacán and Jalisco where back and forth migration to the United States has been the most prevailing. It is believed that Mexican street gangs first emerged after the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo when the United States annexed what is now the southwestern US, from northern Mexico. Today this area is known as California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, parts of Colorado, and Texas (Howell & Moore, 2010). Due to this annexation, Mexican nationals living in the new US territory became naturalized citizens, although, they were segregated and treated as second-class citizens in what was once was their homeland (Howell & Moore, 2010).

In the 1900s, Mexican immigration accelerated due to increased labor demands in the Midwest and Southwest as some two million immigrants came to the United States (Howell & Moore, 2010). The railroad industry came to Los Angeles in 1887, as Los Angeles County increased its population from 12,000 to 120,000. The city continued doubling in population until the 1940s. In the 1970s, the city of Los Angeles had the third most residents of Mexican descent following Mexico City and Guadalajara, with East Los Angeles having the largest concentration of Chicanos also known or identify by many as Mexican-Americans (Moore, 1978). The great migration of Mexicans between the 1940s and 1970s created critical mass population which contributed to the growth of Mexican-American gangs (Howell et al., 2011).

The flow of Mexican immigrants to the West intensified the chances for them and Mexican-Americans to be segregated into unwanted neighborhoods and this increased the
possibilities for associating with street gangs (Howell & Moore, 2010). Vigil (1988) explains that multiple marginality is a way of “adopting coping strategies to adjust to the street life” (p. 87). Neighborhoods where the first gangs settled were predominantly composed of Mexican immigrants. These neighborhoods were located in geographical areas that had been previously avoided by early settlers and developers due to their questionable suitability for habitation. Mexicans were isolated by “cultural, racial and socioeconomic barriers enforced by ingrained prejudices of the Anglo-American [Caucasian] community” (Howell & Moore, 2010, p. 9).

The arrival of African Americans to the West is another crucial factor in the development of gangs in the region. There were two migration periods of African Americans from the Deep South to the West in search of employment opportunities (Howell & Moore, 2010). Los Angeles experienced two phases of gang formation, the first from post-World War II-1965, second from 1970-1972. During each phase, racial issues, segregation, and marginalization centered the development of gangs (Howell, 2010).

These gangs began as social street clubs intended to serve as an outlet to the insistent violence imposed on them by Caucasians. By the end of the 1960s, African Americans experienced a positive ‘black identity’ arising from the Civil Rights Movement. The movement later led to the development of street groups composed of youths seeking a new cultural identity. These groups are believed to be the roots of the two most prominent Los Angeles black gangs the Crips and Bloods (Howell & Moore,
Los Angeles gang culture exploded as it attracted youth from all Southern California areas, and by the 1970s, California and Los Angeles in particular, experienced an emergence of street gangs in virtually all of the most populated areas (Howell et al., 2011).

**South**

The 1970s were an important period concerning gangs in the South. The South had few major metropolitan regions diverse enough or with enough critical mass to support the emergence of gangs. Compared to other regions, gang activity in the South was non-existent before the 1970s. However, in the 1970s, the South experienced a population increase of 32%, while the Midwest realized a 26% increase, 6% in the Northeast, and 3% in the West (Howell et al., 2011). By the end of the 1970s, Southern cities such as Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, New Orleans, and Miami, reported increased gang activity; however, only Miami and San Antonio were recognized as having a serious gang problem. By the end of the 20th century, two Southern states, Texas and Florida joined California and Illinois as the most popular states with cities experiencing the most gang activity. In 1998, Texas, Georgia, and Florida reported to have the largest number of counties with gang problems. This marked a turning point as the South replaced the Northeast as the leading region of gang activity and nationwide (Howell & Moore, 2010).

Howell and Moore (2010) suggest that in both the Northeast and Midwest, gangs were primarily formed between groups of adults from European immigrants, and
developed as a result of social disorders led by ethnic and racial clashes between these
diverse immigrant groups; German, French, British, Scandinavian and later Irish, Italians,
and Jewish. On the other hand, West gangs grew from groups of Mexican youngsters,
stimulated by their cultural pride and ethnic identification, along with their
neighborhoods which are the result of forced marginalization that Mexican-Americans
endured in the West. By embracing their culture and identifying with a *barrio*, groups of
young men saw a way to fight back against the isolation that they were facing. These led
to the evolution of *la palomilla* into the *cholo* subculture which provided a sense of street
lifestyle and reinforced gang formation. Furthermore, gangs in the West were constantly
reinforced because of the constant migration of Mexicans and people from Central
America (Vigil, 1988). After the mid-1960s, a new wave of immigrants from Central and
South America and Asia arrived in the U.S. This was a shift in immigration patterns from
previous European and Mexican migration. Stimulated by the growth of this population
base, by the 1980s, gang activity accelerated and progressively flourished through the
1990s (Howell & Moore, 2010).

**Gang Membership and Negative effects**

Today, gang activity and violence continues to be a major contribution to crime in
the United States (Howell, Egley, Tita & Griffiths, 2011). According to Alleyne and
Wood (2010), many gang members come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and
neighborhoods with active gang activity and high levels of youth delinquency. Youth
between 12-18 years of age are the most at risk of joining a gang, and once they become
members tend to remain active well into adulthood (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Howell (2012) suggests that many youth who join gangs do so between the ages of 11-15, with 14-16 the peak age range for membership.

According to Howell and Egley (2005), earlier research suggests that gang involvement starts before youth reach adolescence. Moreover, for those who are at a higher risk for gang membership, a pattern for affiliation begins as early as 3 or 4 years of age or soon after a youth has initial conduct problems in elementary school. As a result, delinquent behavior may start by the age of 12 years and gang membership between 13-15 years.

Youth gang numbers have increased by 28% since 2008, and of the 774,000 gang members in the United States, 36% are under the age of eighteen (Barrett, Kuperminc, & Lewis, 2013). Hispanics (47%) have the largest percentage of gang members in the United States, followed by African Americans (31%), Caucasians (13%), Asian Americans (7%), and 2% for other groups combined (Tapia et al., 2009). According to Howell (2010), during adolescence, some youth make conscious decisions to join gangs based on environmental and personal factors that encourage them to joining a gang. Seeking protection, pleasure, respect, money, or having friends who are affiliated with a gang are some of the main factors why youth join a gang (Howell, 2010). Other common motivational factors are the need for a sense of a family, and in some cases, coercion from peers intimidates some to join (Akiyama, 2012). Poor parental management, families involved in delinquent activities, and family members engaging in gang activity
contribute to an environment that supports delinquent behavior and eventually gang affiliation (Alleyne & Wood, 2010).

Parents play an essential role in child development; therefore, family structure such as coming from a single parent household, being impoverished, or having financial stressors enhance vulnerability and risk of gang membership (Howell, 2010). Family gang involvement, in particular siblings and cousins, plays a significant role in gang affiliation especially for Mexican American youth (Howell, 2010). Mexican families including extended family members have, “as strong tradition of being a close-knit, strong, and cohesive unit of social control [where] youths are taught to respect their elders and are quickly and sternly disciplined if they misbehave (Vigil, 1988, p. 38). Furthermore, Lachman et al. (2013) suggests that youth may be motivated to join a gang because friends or family members are members.

The influence of peers also appears to have a significant influence on youth and gang membership. Lachman et al. (2013) conclude that studies suggest that youth join peer groups because they are attracted to the activities, standards, values, and behaviors they uphold; therefore, friendships are more possible when sharing similarities such as age group, racial background, social class, and gender. Howell (2010) argues that the social needs of youth such as hanging out, listening to music, doing drugs, and attending parties can be met through peer group or gang affiliation. Consequently, gangs are viewed as the center of social interactions having the ability to provide individuals with
access to drugs and parties where they can socialize with contemporaries of the opposite sex.

Another motivational factor acknowledged with gang affiliation, involves financial gain (Akiyama, 2012). The desire to make money through illegal activities such as selling and distributing narcotics has regularly been cited as a motivational factor for gang membership (Akiyama, 2012; Howell, 2010; Lachman et al., 2013). Gang members may have joined due to living in an area contaminated with gang activity where such activities expose residents to violence from rivals from other neighborhoods; therefore, gang membership offers some protection from rival gang victimization. However, some aspire to gain control of their neighborhood and be the victimizer themselves (Akiyama, 2012). Some members are forced to join a gang by way of violent recruiting tactics such as beatings and even killing someone in order to join (Akiyama, 2012). Joining a gang is a way of gaining personal benefits including prestige and status (Lachman et al. 2013). Youth establish peer groups such as gangs because they offer social support that their families, schools, and communities fail to successfully provide (Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

Negative Effects

Gangs produce difficulties that result in myriad negative effects for those individuals who join gangs compared to those individuals who abstain from gang membership or association. According to O’Brien et al., (2013) active gang members experience difficulties that lead them to be at a high risk of dropping out from school and they have low educational aspirations, which may lead to unstable employment and
higher chances of being arrested. In addition, gang membership may lead to teen parenthood leading to greater financial hardship and family problems. These outcomes unfavorably impact their normal shift into adulthood because these individuals are predisposed to early cohabitation which can lead to early parenthood, forcing them to leave school and their parents’ home. In the majority of cases, the longer adolescents stay active with their gangs the greater the chances that their lives will be disrupted as they transition into adulthood (Krohn et al., 2011). Gang members are prone to criminal acts such as assaults, robberies, theft, and other property crimes. Moreover, compared to their non-gang member peers, gang members also have higher rates of alcohol consumption and drug use (Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001).

Howell and Decker (1999) conclude that individuals who are involved with gangs have a considerably higher risk of drug trafficking and violence compared to non-gang youth, and their involvement increases their chances of using drugs and to have a longer term participating in dealing with them. Compared to individuals who have never been members, gang affiliated youth engage in more crime particularly related to violent acts, drugs, and use of weapons (O’Brien et al., 2013). They are also three times more likely to sell drugs, and twice as likely to carry firearms (Hill et al. 2001).

Wood and Alleyne (2008) affirm that gang members are three times more likely to engage in public assaults, eight times more prone to commit robbery, ten times more likely to participate in a homicide, and twenty times more likely to participate in a drive-by shootings in comparison to at risk youth. Violence is often a central characteristic of
gang members, and is regularly employed; therefore, it is considered an essential tool because it enhances members’ ability to obtain material assets, an affluent life style, and status (Wood, 2014). Under certain circumstances such as threats or hostile stares from rival gang members, violent behavior is essential and even expected in order to avoid being disrespected or challenged by rival gang members (Vigil, 2003).

**Gang Association Risk Factors**

Current research on gang association has focused on assessing the predominance of gangs in the United States, the comparison of drug consumption and criminal behavior between gang members with non-gang members, and strategic plans for deterrence and intervention (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Much of the current research has been collected from individuals who are already associated with gangs (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). While this has provided important ethnographic evidence regarding characteristics of those who are already involved in gangs, it excludes other links to gang association from risk factors (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Nonetheless, the complexity of gang formation dynamics has attracted the interest of many researchers from diverse disciplines who examine gangs from different perspectives including criminology, psychology, and sociology (Howell, 2010).

A popular assumption is that youth are forced to join gangs. Most research, however, has found that most members join because they want to be part of a gang. During adolescence, they make a conscious decision to affiliate with a gang based on several personal and environmental factors that influence them on make such decision
According to Hill et al. (2001), the findings from the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP) suggest that gang membership is a product of antisocial effects within neighborhoods and the antisocial tendencies of their family and peers. Poor performance in school and personal behavior problems are also factors that characterize those youths who join gangs from those who abstain.

Youth who experience trouble adjusting behaviorally and socially during childhood are more likely to be part of a gang for longer periods. This is especially so with youth who have a history of violent behavior and relationships with antisocial peers (Hill et al., 2001). In an effort to understand the different dynamics within gang development, most research has identified five common domains: individual, family, peer, school, and community that serve as risk factors for predicting gang membership (O’Brien et al., 2013). The probability of a youth joining a gang increases based on the level of risk factors in that youth’s life because the more factors that influences, the greater the chances of joining a gang (Hill et al., 2001).

**Personal (Individual Risk Factors)**

Scholars cannot predict why a specific person joins a gang; however, they can identify various risk factors that lead to greater probability of gang membership (Howell, 2010). Youth have the highest risk for joining a gang, and various personal reasons motivate some to join. Some of the most common reasons are based on social relationships: to be around friends and family members who are already affiliated, or because of the assumed protection that gangs provide (Howell & Egley, 2005). Antisocial
behavior is one of the most common individual factors displayed by those who join
gangs; as a result, youth who routinely engage in antisocial behavior have greater
probabilities of becoming gang members (Howell, 2010). For example, Howell (2010),
affirmed that children whose antisocial behavior worsens so that they engage in
aggressive, delinquent, or violent, confrontation in school have a higher probability of
joining a gang during their adolescence.

Antisocial behavior such as the use of alcohol and drugs may predict gang
involvement when the consumption is extensive, involves marijuana, and begins at an
early age (Howell, 2010). Youth, who have early experience with marijuana consumption
beginning at the ages of 10-12 years old, have a higher probability for joining a gang.
These youth are four times more likely to join a gang when they reach the ages of 13-18
years old (Estrada, Gilreath, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2013). Bjerregaard (2010) concludes
that drug use and violent offenses increase the likelihood of gang affiliation. Early
participation in delinquency or violence with or without a weapon, are other forms of
antisocial behavior that influence gang membership. Also, a youth’s attitude toward
delinquent behavior indicates a higher tolerance for deviance, which can increase
antisocial behaviors such as violent offenses that endorse gang activity (Howell, 2010;
O’Brien et al., 2013). Those who have engaged in prior offenses and associate with
delinquent peers have a higher risk for gang membership. A study of 3,700 youth
attending school, established that active gang membership among youth is related to a
considerable increase in engaging in violent acts (O’Brien et al., 2013).
Victimization is another significant individual domain that serves as a predictor of individual violence since it is related to both violence and aggression, and serve as predictors for gang membership (Howell & Egley, 2005). Katz, Webb, Fox, and Shaffer (2011) conclude that Decker & Van Winkle (1996), suggest that protection from crime victimization is why some people join a gang. Many join a gang in hopes that the victimization that they have been experiencing will decrease since the gang offers protection. However, gang members are still subjected to violence and victimization as they go through an initiation process including high levels of violence after they join (Peterson, Taylor & Esbensen, 2004).

For many, their first contact with violence or victimization begins in their own neighborhood or within their family where many experienced physical and sexual abuse (Fox et al., 2012). In many cases, in order to join, they must fight other gang members as an initiation ritual, yet some only do it because they do not have a choice and joining is the only way they can avoid random attack from others while walking in their own neighborhood (Vigil, 1998). According to Peterson et al. (2004), initiations vary from gang to gang, however, some interviewees recounted a process in which prospective gang members were expected to fight current gang members who were arrayed either in a line or circle. When an individual becomes a gang member ironically, his/her participation in risky behavior dramatically increases, and she/he becomes susceptible to high levels of victimization. Compared to non-gang members, active gang members have a greater risk of victimization since they now live a risky lifestyle, where the sale and use of drugs and
distant behavior increases their chances of victimization. Also, they have a greater risk of being victims of assaults, drive-by shootings by rival gangs, and they can receive punishments by their own gang for breaking their rules or misbehaving (Fox et al., 2012; Katz et al., 2011).

According to a group of middle school students who identified as gang members, were 28% more likely to report being shot as compared to 4% of non-gang members. Eventually, many become tired of the gang life style, but their fear for ruthless violence that may cause them severe injuries as a result of retaliation discourages them from trying to leave the gang since this is viewed as a betrayal (Vigil, 1988). Therefore, gang members may experience high levels of victimization both before and during their gang involvement and only abates once they leave their gang (Katz et al., 2011).

Mental health problems are another individual domain that increases risk for youth joining gangs. Anxiety, conduct disorders, depression, hyperactivity, and low empathy, all intensify the chances for gang affiliation among youths (Howell, 2010; O’Brien et al., 2013). Additionally, low self-esteem is strongly associated with aggression, delinquent and antisocial behavior, as influences for gang membership. Some studies support the idea that youth with less confidence, self-esteem, and who have weak bonds with family and their social environment have a higher likelihood of joining gangs than those youth who are more confident, have greater self-esteem, and exhibit stronger bonds (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). For some individuals joining gangs may improve their self-esteem since many of these individuals come from similar backgrounds; therefore,
they seek social support from those gang members that can relate to their struggles (Yonder, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2003).

There is a strong relationship between self-esteem and gang membership, which plays a significant role in whether an individual becomes a member of a gang or if he decides to leave the gang because it will take a person with a high self-esteem to resist joining a gang and to leave the gang (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). However, for a great number of individuals it is hard to abstain from gang activity since many are marginalized living in undesirable neighborhoods, where they may have been systematically labeled and destined for poor socioeconomic status and their parents have failed to provide them with the adequate parenting (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). In particular the marginality from mainstream American society that many have faced has been linked to problems associated with establishing an identity and with having a low self-esteem (Krohn et al., 2011). As a result, gangs have filled the needs of numerous individuals by providing friendships, emotional support, protection, and for some it has served as substitute parent (Vigil, 2002).

Family Risk Factors

Family involvement plays a significant role in child development since birth parents are critical to the life of their child. Poor family relations may lead to gang involvement because gangs provide the emotional support that is not found at home (Howell, 2010; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). During the early stages in child’s development, any instability in family structure such as single-parent households,
caretaker swaps, family transitions, financial stressors, poverty, and family members’
gang membership, are strong risk factors that have a major impact on decisions to join a
gang (Howell, 2010; O’Brien et al., 2013). These harsh conditions reduce the
effectiveness of parenting skills such as control, and supervision, and interrupt the growth
of a strong family bond (Howell, 2010). Family socioeconomic status is further
associated with gang affiliation, and reinforces the idea that gang members come from
backgrounds of a low socioeconomic status (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; O’Brien et al.,
2013).

Life in the barrios for Mexican-Americans serves as example to how these
adversities influence them to join gangs since gang activity often serves as a vehicle to
fill the voids that these conditions create (Vigil, 1988, 2002). Hispanic immigrant
families are known to have strong family ties, which serve as a deterrent for deviant
behavior (Krohn et al., 2011). For traditional Mexican families, strong family ties
promote respect for elders and authority; however, the harsh economic inequalities, social
marginalization, and culture conflict make them prone to family stress. Family
disturbances often stresses parenting obligations which has been acknowledged by many
gangs members as one of the reasons for joining since they felt the gang could provide
the support that was lacking from their families (Vigil, 1988, 2002).

Families serve as the first line of defense against gang membership; however,
when disrupted families experience hardships that include poor parental supervision and
family marginalization, these result in less control over youth which can enhance
involvement in delinquent behavior and gang association (Freng & Esbensen, 2007).
Poor parenting is characterized by low levels of parental supervision, which affects a child’s early adolescence, and these families appear to condone violence in or outside the home since they do not pay much attention to their children. Violence from inadequate family care may be displayed as a form of family conflict, child abuse, neglect, or victimization, and these reasons force some youths to find a sense of family within gangs (Howell, 2010; Howell & Egley, 2005). Among Hispanics, family norms and values play a significant role where youths depend on their families for both emotional and financial support to a greater degree when compared to individuals of different ethnicities and cultures (Krohn et al., 2011).

A study conducted by Smith and Krohn (1995) validated this assumption regarding the importance of parenting involvement as they compared Hispanic with non-Hispanic youth. Their results were based on a sample of 1000 youth, which showed that parent and child relationship, and coming from a single parent household, were strongly related to delinquency (Krohn et al. 2011). Youth whose antisocial behaviors increase, such as early involvement in delinquency, aggression, and violence have a higher probability of joining a gang (Howell, 2010).

**Peer Risk Factors**

The literature suggests that youth who join a particular peer group do so because they are attracted by the group’s activities, behaviors, norms, and values (Lachman et al., 2013). Associating with peers who engage in delinquent behavior is one of the highest
risk factors for gang membership, and aggressive and antisocial youth are more likely to associate with other youth having similar characteristics (Howell, 2010). This association develops during childhood and continues through adolescence. Youth friendships are expected to develop when individuals have similar features such as age, race, sex, and social class. As a result, the relationship or friendship existing with aggressive peers becomes a significant predictor of gang membership (Howell, 2010; Lachman et al., 2013).

Many youth are driven to join a group because their friends are already members, or they are following in the steps of a family member. Other motivational factors for joining a gang are the ability to make money, gain prestige or status, and to socialize with peers that share the same interests (Lachman et al., 2013; Melde et al., 2011). Lachman et al. (2013) indicate that most studies propose that adolescents join a peer group due to an attraction to the behaviors, norms, and values of a specific group. Frequently, youth who grow up in marginalized neighborhoods where they are exposed to gang activity, tend to admire gangs. As a result, they see gang members as role models and they aspire to join gangs themselves. From an early age, they mimic and adopt the group’s norms in order to be accepted (Wood, 2014; Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Due to the marginalization experienced by Mexican-Americans, many are prone to joining peer groups such as gangs. These individuals view gangs as a source of friendship and engage in recreational activities with individuals who they can identify with as they share culture and family values (Vigil, 1988). For Mexican-Americans, some of the effects of multiple marginality
include lack of opportunities, poverty, and isolation into undesirable neighborhoods. It is in these neighborhoods where youth find gangs as a coping strategy for acculturation since the majority of gang members share the same struggles and have the same ethnic background (Vigil, 1988, 2002).

_Education (School Risk Factors)_

One of the primary school experiences that can be associated with gang membership is academic failure (Miller et al., 2011). Poor school performance, low-test scores, and poor grades forecast delinquency and gang involvement (Howell, 2010; Howell & Egley, 2005). During these early educational years, academic failure predicts less involvement and weak commitment to school and education later. Along the same lines, the strength of the relationship with teachers can lead to positive or negative focus on school (Howell, 2010). According to Estrada et al. (2013), students who report low attachment and commitment to school during fifth and sixth grades had twice as much chances of joining gangs between middle and high school. Students who tried marijuana between the ages 10-12 years old had four times greater chance to become gang members between the ages of 13 and 18 years old.

The school environment itself is another powerful predictor for gang membership. There is a 78% increase in the chance of a student becoming a gang member if they perceive a hostile environment in their schools (Howell, 2010; Estrada et al., 2013). Low functioning schools having poor academic quality, along with significant levels of victimization increase future delinquency and gang membership as well (Howell, 2010).
In addition, schools with ‘zero-tolerance policies’, increased rates of suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts, offer additional dynamics related to poor school environments which may lead to the formation of additional gangs and an increase in the number of students who join them (Howell, 2010; Howell & Eagly, 2005). As a consequence of the school environment, the youth may feel unsafe which can make him/her feel more vulnerable and seek protection and eventual gang membership (Howell, 2010).

*Neighborhood Location (Community Risk Factors)*

Risk factors can shape social perceptions. Neighborhoods that are known to have gangs will shape views regarding crime and gang membership (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). During the development of a child, the environment where he grows up becomes a great influence. As children grow older they are more vulnerable to the community’s negative influences especially if they live in neighborhoods where they face unsafe conditions such as violence and threats from rival neighborhood gangs. This forces them to seek protection due to fear of victimization. (Howell, 2010; Alleyne & Wood, 2010). The ‘territory or turf’ has historically been an important aspect of gang identity since it gives a symbolic value to a location where these groups of people are willing to use violence in order to defend their territory (Watkins & Moule, 2013). Social structures such as church, family, government, and schools are essential in providing youths with the necessary support. However, when they fail to effectively provide this support, youth because more susceptible to form groups or join gangs in order to find a social support system (Wood & Alleyne, 2010).
The Chicago School, emphasized the significance of neighborhood disorganization in predicting delinquency and the development of gangs (Katz & Schnebly, 2011). Neighborhood safety, drug use and availability, arrests, and access to firearms have served as predictors of gang membership (Howell & Egley, 2005). Low socioeconomic status, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities influence youth into gang participation (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Marginalization of inner-city youth and poverty within their communities is exacerbated by a lack of economic and social growth opportunities. As a consequence, many youth perceive gangs as an opportunity for financial gain and access to material goods (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001).

Gangs place a high symbolic value on geographic territory. This allows members free to use violence whenever they feel that other groups or gang members threaten their territory (Watkins & Moule, 2013). There are many individuals who join a gang because living in certain neighborhoods have a strong presence of gangs, which in turn leads to greater opportunities for gang membership and victimization by rival gangs (Akiyama, 2012). Gangs provide a sense of belonging, identity, safety, and a sense of having a family, an all-powerful motivational factors that influence many youths to engage in gang activity despite the use of violence (Akiyama, 2010).
Acculturation, Ethnic Identity, and Multiple Marginality

Since the 1848 annexation of the northern Mexican territories by the United States, individuals of Mexican heritage residing in the US, have been exposed to cultural and economic domination by Anglo (Caucasians) Americans (Erlanger, 1979). In addition to the various factors that predict gang involvement, acculturative stress and the overall acculturation experience play significant roles in social development and dissonance in Latinos (Barrett et al., 2013). The process of acculturation has a significant effect on Hispanics immigrants compared to native-born Euro-Americans and African-Americans because they have not been exposed and do not experience the effects of ‘culture shock’ experienced by Hispanics. Their reality can be associated to those migrating from other foreign countries leaving their culture for another one, and having to assimilate to a different life style (Alvarez-Rivera, Nobles & Lersch, 2014).

Acculturation is the primary concern for understanding Latino social behavior; it is a core process that involves assimilation, integration, and marginalization once immigrants experience any first hand contact with the host country’s culture and people (Kao & Travis, 2005). Culture is a term that implies how groups of people live their lives and includes the instruments and methods necessary to obtain nourishment from their environment. This includes the network of social relations such as customs, statutes, and religion or understandings about ‘supernatural or supreme beings’. Culture has been considered to have a prolonged effect in influencing the lives of people throughout their whole life (Corsini, 1987). For many Mexican-Americans, gang membership serves as an
instrument to cope with the adversities they deal with as a consequence of blocked opportunities because those who fail to acculturate are more prone to be marginalized from mainstream society (Miller et al., 2011). Within the gang many find a place where they are not marginalized, and this serves them as an outlet to find a group where they can belong, identify, and find support and nourishment as if it were their own family (Malec, 2006).

Acculturation is the process in which two different cultures encounter one another, resulting in major changes in one or both cultures, or the process where attitudes, behavior, and values are altered as a result of constant interaction with people from a different ethnic groups (Miller et al., 2011; Alvarez-Rivera et al., 2014). One of the major changes that people experience when two cultures come into contact, is that some will fail to be acculturated into the new culture; as a result, the failure to acculturate increases that chances for gang membership. Acculturation also describes how one culture is transferred to a different group of people, and as a process where members of a minority group adopt the culture of the majority group (Negy & Woods, 1992). In addition, acculturation is the process by which people find out about regulations and the specific set of rules for particular behavioral characteristics of a specific group of people (Corsini, 1987). It is in this process where once an individual comes into contact with another, culture begins a slow transition into learning the new language, cultural beliefs, norms, and values of the dominant ethnic group (Alvarez-Rivera et al., 2014).
The United States currently has a small majority population of Anglo-Americans (Caucasian); therefore, non-Anglo-Americans are responsible for becoming acculturated to the American way of life as they pick up the customs, language, and values of the dominant Anglo-American culture (Negy & Woods, 1992). An individual’s acculturation is a direct outcome of the amount of time she/he spends experiencing the new culture; as a result, the years spent living in the U.S. play a significant role in the individual’s acculturation process while youth typically acculturate at a faster rate than their parents (Kao & Travis, 2005).

An individual’s level of acculturation is frequently utilized to measure how well adapted she/he adjusts to the lifestyle of his/her new country. Language proficiency, employment, and education fulfillment are variables that can be utilized to determine a person’s level of acculturation (Alvarez-Rivera et al., 2014). Within the US, those of European decent comprise the dominant ethnic group; therefore, those of a non-Euro-American background are considered to be acculturated once they have learned and assimilated into the language, norms, and values of the Euro-American culture (Negy & Woods, 1992). Buriel (1993) found that Mexican-American’s Mexican cultural identity decreases greatly between first and second generations, yet both groups still have a stronger cultural identity with their culture of origin compared to those of European decent, which creates conflict in acculturating into mainstream American culture. In this case, adapting to the new culture takes place once the Mexican-American youth assimilates into the American western culture. On the other hand, there are some
individuals who are not capable of effectively adjusting to the new culture due to poverty, lack of opportunities such as employment, educational growth, and racism (Lopez & Brummett, 2003).

Hispanics have dramatically increased their percentage of the overall population in the United States. Hispanics suddenly increased because of their large immigrant numbers, which account for about a 50% of the U.S. Hispanic population (Smart & Smart, 1995). Furthermore, the percentage of Mexican American youth involved in gangs increased by 28%. There are approximately 774,000 gang members in the United States where roughly 36% are under 18 years old and about 50% come from a Hispanic background (Barret, Kupermic & Lewis, 2013). Prior research by Lopez and Brummett (2003) suggests that gang membership among Hispanics is connected to the process of acculturation. In particular, studies by Belitz & Valdez, 1994; Moore, 1978; Morales, 1982, 1992; Vigil, 1988 have suggest that those individuals who are less assimilated into the American or Anglo (Caucasian) society are at a higher risk and have a greater possibility for joining gangs (Miller et al., 2011). The association between acculturation and gang membership has been linked with Hispanics in terms that Hispanic gang members are less acculturated compared to non-gang members (Freng & Esbensen, 2007).

Lopez and Brummett (2003) examined the connection between acculturation and gang membership by assessing a sample of youth in probation camps in Los Angeles County. They found that those who identified as gang members were less acculturated
compared to non-gang members. Furthermore, gang members had a stronger association with Mexicans, this included having Mexican friends growing up, and identifying more so as a Mexican-American or Mexican compared to non-gang members. They reported having a difficult time accepting the norms of Euro-Americans or establishing friendships with them. Lopez and Brummett validate Vigil’s (1988) argument regarding Mexican-American gang members (cholos) refusal to subject to dominant group culture, and instead they embraced their principal culture. An example of this can be traced back to the 1970s during the peak of the Chicano Movement when Mexican-Americans were no longer feeling ashamed or tried to hide their ethnic background. Instead, they embraced their Mexican roots and took pride in their Aztec origin, and this grow into becoming a symbol for Mexican-American identity (Hurtado & Gurin, 2004).

The involvement of minority groups in gangs is often seen as an indication of a greater societal problem involving poverty, discrimination, segregation, and urbanization. These are important factors that many discuss when it comes to gang membership (Freng & Esbensen, 2007). Additionally, structural realities such as economic deprivation, weak educational institutions, and limited employment opportunities have been linked to Hispanic gang membership (Miller et al., 2011). For example, second generation Mexican-Americans often experience acculturation changes through culture conflict with both cultures (Mexican and American); as a result, their cultural identity may be uncertain and can make the gang culture more appealing (neighborhood) (Vigil, 2002). Second generation Mexican-Americans have encountered a more hostile experience with
culture conflict due to clashes with the language at their home and school, a sense of
distance with their parents since in most cases they both work, and the quality of their
neighborhood, which in many cases exposes them to the dangers of the streets (Vigil,
1988).

The connection between gang membership and acculturation begins with
individuals who believe they are less acculturated and revert back to their ethnic identity
by way of choloization as a way to resist the American or Anglo (Caucasian) values and
society (Miller et al., 2011). Choloization can be recognized as an outcome of the
acculturation process where those who are less acculturated have a greater chance of
being marginalized from society which leads to rejection from society as they create
alternative social groups such as gangs (Miller et al., 2011). The term choloization has its
roots in the word cholo, derived from the Spanish word ‘solo’ which means alone, and
was later associated with the isolation that was experienced by the less acculturated Latin
American Indians during the Spanish colonial period (Miller et al., 2011; Lopez &
Brummett, 2003; Vigil, 1988). In modern usage, cholo in the United States has evolved
its definition to recognize gang membership or gang members among Mexican-
Americans, and contemporary Mexican-American gang members have tailored the word
cholo to articulate their cultural identification (Lopez & Brummett, 2003; Vigil, 2002).
Mexican-Americans in the barrios utilized the cholo lifestyle to establish an identity, this
identity is the result of.
The *cholo* lifestyle can be viewed as process in which an identity is created as a result of mixing two cultures and this can help establish an identity for those who struggle to establish an identity, or are not fully acculturated in the American culture (Vigil, 1988, 2002). *Cholos* have a unique street style of dress, speech, and language which incorporates a mixture of English and Spanish (known as *Spanglish*), tattoos, and graffiti characters that are associated with their barrio (gang). This style is strongly associated with gangs, yet many Mexican-Americans use this style as a sense of fashion without joining a gang (Vigil, 1988, 2002).

Lopez and Brummett (2003) hypothesized that gang members of Mexican-American decent hold a stronger Mexican orientation when compared to non-gang members. They suggest that gang membership for some Mexican-Americans might be a way of forming an identity, and a means of embracing their Mexican culture. For example, when Mexican descent adolescent gang members struggle to form an identity, they regularly turn back to their culture of origin and explore how they sense being Chicano (Mexican-American) and gang membership strengthens their identity (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). According to Malec (2006), Hispanic gangs have incorporated emblematic images and beliefs that express their pride in their culture; however, these images that previously had a positive meaning or reference are now associated with criminal gang culture. For example, Mexican usage of the phrase *La Raza* was a popular phrase used to praise Mexican culture and heritage, today is associated with gang activity, and a gang adopted this phrase as their name (Malec, 2006). This serves as an
explanation of how Mexican culture plays an important role with Mexican-American gang subculture since they use their culture of origin to show their pride and identify or relate with others with similar traits.

The process of acculturation can be shaped by the individual’s feelings of marginalization (Miller et al., 2011). The individual’s ethnic background plays a significant role because when a particular ethnic group maintains a strong contact with its culture, its physical and cultural features serve as way of generating social barriers. Therefore, those ethnic groups that have physical features that clearly separates them from the Caucasian (Euro American) majority, are instantly exposed to discrimination and prejudice (Vigil, 2002). For a great number of Mexican-American students, their appearance can be identified as an inheritance from Mexico, which encompass their indigenous roots such as dark skin; however, due to this physical feature they experience forms of denigration from Euro-Americans who are the dominant group and including other Hispanics (Conchas, Oseguera, & Vigil, 2012). Growing up in the US under these conditions intensifies their instability in the process of forming an identity with a culture that views them as outsiders. Therefore, due to social instability they are pushed to look for stability within a group they can be familiarized and identify with, and for many gangs, this serve as an outlet to fulfill their needs (Malec, 2006).

Vigil’s multiple marginality framework concentrates on explaining gang membership in minority populations originally beginning with Hispanics in the ‘barrios’ (neighborhoods) of Los Angeles and later expanding to African Americans, Vietnamese
and other Hispanic ethnic groups such as Salvadorians. However, there is no evidence of any experimental test of Vigil’s multiple marginality theory applied to White Americans, and the framework has not been examined beyond qualitative research (Freng & Esbensen, 2007).

Street gangs are a consequence of marginalization, which can be interpreted as the relegation of certain individuals or ethnic groups to the edge of society where economic and social circumstances create a feeling of helplessness due to the lack of basic social services and opportunities (Vigil, 2002). Multiple marginality embraces the outcomes of the life in the ‘barrio’ (neighborhood), such as a problem with acculturation, difficulties of developing a self-identity, poor socioeconomic status, and anti-social street socialization (Vigil, 1988).

There are several important components in the relationship between race/ethnicity and gang affiliation: macrohistorical and macrostructural forces, ecological and economic stressors, elements of social control, and street socialization which are highlighted in Vigil’s conceptualization of multiple marginality (Freng & Esbensen, 2007). Macrohistorical components such as racism, cultural and social oppression, and disintegrated institutions in conjunction with macrostructural components include immigration and migration, and segregated neighborhoods and activate the process of marginality (Freng & Esbensen, 2007; Vigil, 1988). Both macrohistorical and macrostructural components pave the way for economic insecurity, lack of opportunities, poverty, disintegrated institutions of social control, and psychological and emotional
obstacles in ethnic minority communities. As a result, minorities living in these communities experience poor living conditions, individual and family stress related to culture conflict, and racism, and cultural oppression in schools (Vigil, 2002). Moreover, multiple marginality refers to the many disadvantages that Mexican American families and their children experience in contemporary America. The origin of multiple marginality can be traced to the historical experiences of the Mexican community in the United States as all Mexican immigrants were segregated to unwanted ‘barrios ‘neighborhoods (Miller et al., 2011; Vigil, 1988).

Everyday struggles from different perspectives impact and deprive minority groups from their coping skills, and being excluded from mainstream society leaves few chances and limited resources for seeking better life opportunities. As a result, some seek alternatives that avoid marginalization, and the streets tend to be where they find their way (Vigil, 2002). Gangs offer street youths both positive and negative influences that can become coping mechanisms to improve social difficulties and create opportunities for personal gratification since gangs offer economic and psychological support to their members, and can provide marginalized youth an environment where they can relate and oppose the social order that rejected them (Miller et al., 2011; Vigil, 1998).

Vigil suggests that economic insecurities, lack of opportunities, poverty, disintegrated institutions of social control, and psychological and emotional obstacles interact to create a collective effect that leads to marginalization and results in gang membership where membership serves as a coping mechanism for youth to seek self-
identity and adapt to marginality (Miller et al., 2011; Vigil 2002). Ultimately, Choloization plays a significant role for Mexican-Americans connected with gangs as it operates as the principal instrument that helps them embrace and display their ethnic identity. Along with the support from the gang and their solid ethnic identification their psychological needs concerning the place they hold in society can be gratified (Miller et al. 2011).

Summary/Conclusion

Gangs in the United States are a major contemporary societal problem. They are organizations of crime and violence, and their illicit activities affect many communities. In order to understand the magnitude of gang activity, it is crucial to understand the reasons and motivations that lead individuals to join a gang.

According to the literature, there are a variety of reasons why an individual joins a gang. Some of the most common are the need for protection and following the footsteps of family members or friends (Melde, Diem & Drake, 2012). Also, Lachman et al. (2012) explain that motivations for joining a gang include personal benefits such as prestige and status. Youth join gangs to boost their self-esteem and gain social support to deal with psychological and familial issues (Yonder, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2003). Culture ultimately plays a significant role with gang membership as those who are less assimilated into mainstream American (Anglo) society are at greater risk for joining gangs (Miller et al. 2011).
The United States is composed of diverse groups of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds who must all overcome acculturation since they share a common goal of finding better opportunities. Hispanics compose the largest single percentage (47%) of racial/ethnic diversity of gangs in the United States (Tapia, Kinnier, & Mackinnon, 2009). Miller et al. (2009) found that Hispanic youth who had lower levels of acculturation were more prone to become gang affiliated. The involvement of minority groups in gangs is seen as an indication of a greater societal problem; as a result, poverty, discrimination, segregation, and urbanization are important factors that many theories discuss when it comes to gang membership (Freng & Esbensen, 2007). Other factors defined as structural realities such as economic deprivation, weak educational institutions, and limited employment opportunities have been associated with enabling Hispanic gang membership (Miller et al. 2011).

Immigrants are routinely marginalized. As a result, they associate themselves with similar peers who share common culture, langue, or race. Additionally, any race or ethnicity is vulnerable to the impact of gangs including victimization, intimidation, or threats. Despite the fact that gangs are portrayed negatively, some individuals are inclined to join a gang due to the appeal of similar culture and viewpoints.

The family is a vital dimension, due to the fact that there are some ethnic groups who are more dependent on their family for finances, as well as emotional and psychological support. If there is a lack of such support, some may look for that support elsewhere. Due to an individuals’ need for protection, or moral and financial support, he
will be more likely to join a gang since many believe that gangs can provide what family cannot. Further research in this topic may provide the necessary tools for society to understand the magnitude of gang’s impact on minorities particularly on Mexican-Americans who have to deal with a conflict between two different cultures, which may have a greater impact in defining their identity. By acknowledging this problem we can find better methods to diminish the impact of these risk factors associated with gang membership, so that they will have less influence on marginalization and consequently gang membership.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Overview

This study addressed the following research question: Does multiple-marginality influence Mexican-American male identity and social behaviors? This research explores the perceptions and experiences related to ethnic identity and how culture conflict shaped a group of young Mexican-American men in Sacramento, California. A qualitative, ethnographic case study based on in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with a group of eighteen Mexican-American male participants was conducted in order to answer this question.

Babbie (2013) defines qualitative analysis as a “nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships…” (p. 390). The interviews elicited information regarding participant socio-demographic variables including: educational level, family structure, and involvement with Mexican-American culture, peer influence, exposure to and participation in deviant behavior. Responses provided data exploring how acculturation and these social demographic variables cause culture conflict, and influence subsequent gang membership.

Sellin (1938) argues that culture conflict occurs when the norms, values, and beliefs of two cultures clash for what is acceptable behavior, result in crime. To begin
with, the primary conflict occurs when conflict involves basic cultural beliefs, in this case Mexican-Americans dealing with language and mainstream cultural practices that differ from those of Euro-Americans. As a result, conflict plays a significant role in Mexican-American communities in terms of defining an identity and engaging in social behaviors that lead to crimes and gang affiliation. Mexican-Americans have a unique experience as compared to other immigrant groups since at one point what today is the Southwest US, belonged to Mexico and the cultural traditions were already well established. The proximity to Mexico is why many Mexican-Americans strongly identify with their culture and all its aspects from the language, foods, and traditions unlike other ethnic groups that lose much of their culture once they integrate into the US.

**Population of Study and Sample Access**

Data were gathered from a convenience sample that included eighteen Mexican-American male participants. According to Babbie (2013), “Relying on available subjects… is sometimes called ‘convenience’ or ‘haphazard’ sampling” (p. 190). This sampling method was utilized due to the researcher’s established relationship with the Sacramento Mexican-American community. This provided easy access to approach and recruit participants.

All participants were self-reported Mexican-Americans having a variety of life experiences, ranging in age from 18 to 30 years old. The intent of this study was to question this aged group because they were believed to have already overcome many of the obstacles involved with gang activities, and so they could provide insight into the
challenges facing ethnic identity and culture conflict. Prior to being interviewed, participants provided verbal consent to be recorded with a digital audio recorder, and were informed that their interviews would be completely anonymous and that pseudonyms would be used to mask their identity and insure anonymity.

**Setting**

For security and safety reasons, interviews were conducted at two locations that fit the criteria of neutral and public sites. Participants were given the option of interviewing at a local coffee shop or inside the Sacramento State University library. The majority of the interviews were held at commercial coffee shops at neutral and convenient locations for both participant and researcher where there was access to a patio table to ensure greater privacy. The interviews held at the Sacramento State University library were conducted inside independent study rooms.

Throughout the interviews I placed a table between the participants and myself, so I could place my digital audio recorder and notebook in front of them as I took handwritten notes so they could see what I was recording. Privacy was not an issue at both interview locations because the independent study enclosed rooms used exclusively by the individual occupants; therefore, only the participant and researcher had access to the room during the course of the interview. For those interviews conducted at a coffee shop, I arrived well before the scheduled appointment to ensure the interview space could be secured in the most private space available. Once the interviews began the only issues were interruptions from random customers utilizing the commercial and public facilities.
**Data Collection**

The interview consisted of thirty-nine questions divided into six sections: Demographics, Education, Family, Culture, Peers (Friends and Family), and Social Problem Association/Relationship. All of the interviews were recorded onto a digital audio recorder, and notes were recorded into a notebook. The digital audio recorder was the most important tool for the collection of data because it allowed for the exact recording of the participant’s responses. These interviews consisted of eighteen in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face individual interviews, each lasting forty-five to fifty-five minutes, and all interviews were conducted over a period of thirty days from May 3, 2016 to June 2, 2016.

The first step at the beginning of each interview was to hand the participant a copy of the consent form (See Appendix A) and explain the purpose of the research. After reviewing the consent form with each participant and receiving their verbal consent, they were informed that they could skip any questions they wished or that made them uncomfortable, they were also told that they could end the interview whenever they desired. Once these provisions were agreed to and verbal consent given, the participants were told that at the count of three the digital voice recorder would be turned on and the interview would begin.
During the interviews, all the participants were instructed to answer each question to the best of their ability. No time limit or length of response was imposed as most questions (See Appendix B) were open-ended; this allowed respondents to answer the questions at their own discretion. Questions focused on participant educational level, family, knowledge of Mexican-American culture, peer influence, and exposure to deviant behavior in order to explore how these variables influenced, shaped, or developed their ethnic identity, and the degree culture conflict played in influencing their perspective and behavior.

It was expected that participants would be honest and candid and that they were excited about sharing their experiences that related to these areas. A couple participants seemed to be embarrassed about their past experiences which included stealing and associating with the “wrong crowd”. None had serious issues responding to any of the questions; however, several did not know what acculturation was. Therefore, when asked: “Do you feel acculturation has played a significant role within your family and yourself?” I had to explain what was being asked.

Based on the participant’s body language, some seemed uncomfortable when they were asked: “Have you ever been involved with any activities that are considered illegal or that violates the rules, such as skipping school or stealing?” In the end, most were exited to share their experiences and provided more information than was asked even adding explicit details. For the most part, most questions were answered with the exception that some did not remember when they first came to the United States and
since many of the participants were born in the US, these questions was either skipped or
was answered, “I was born here.” In addition, the question regarding marriage and
children was skipped by some participants or simply answered, “Not married, no
children”.

Limitations

The results cannot be generalized beyond the current research as the data were
derived from a small, non-probability convenience sample and are not likely to provide a
comprehensive interpretation of Mexican-American ethnic identity and culture conflict
issues in the United States. Participant responses may be subject to social desirability due
to the researcher’s ethnic background and familiarity with each participant. There is
always the possibility that interviewees gave answers that they thought the interviewer
wanted to hear. As a result, some of the answers provided may not reflect the candor or
insight anticipated. Further, the Sacramento region was selected as the primary
geographical site for this research because of its significant Mexican-American
population, yet their experiences may still be different when compared to Mexican-
Americans living elsewhere in the United States. Therefore, in order to get more valid
and reliable results, there is a need for broader qualitative and quantitative research
addressing this matter at a bigger scale beyond Sacramento.
Chapter 4

Analysis

Data were analyzed utilizing a system of ‘line-by-line’ coding to generate themes from the interviews. According to Charmaz (2006), “coding is more than a beginning, it shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis” (p. 4). This process produced five themes: Individual (socio-demographics), Education, Family, Culture conflict and Ethnic Identity, and Influence of Peers. To insure confidentiality, participants were assigned random pseudonyms.

Participants age ranged in age from 18 to 30 years old. Only 16% (n=3) were born in Sacramento, 61% (n=11) have lived there between 16-25 years, and the remaining 22% (n=4) have been residents from 10-15 years. Eight participants reported that they were born in Mexico. Five reported arriving in the US when they were 1-5 years old, 2 between 6-10, and 1 when he was around 13 years old. In terms of education, 22% were college graduates, 16% had some college, 33% completed high school (n=6) or had earned a GED, and 27% had dropped out of high school (See Appendix C).

Language

Over half (n=11) of the participants indicated that their primary language or the language they preferred to speak was Spanish. The main reason reported why was because most (n=13) participants are first generation Mexican-Americans and have parents who do not know how to or speak very little English. As Tony indicated, “at
home, I mainly speak Spanish because my parents do not know English, they know very little, but when I’m with my Mexican friends I use a lot of ‘Spanglish’ (a combination of Spanish and English), mainly English and a lot of American slang words”. This is common among many Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, and many of the participants indicated that ‘Spanglish’ was frequently used at school, and with friends, and family. Those participants (n=7) who indicated that English is their primary or preferred language, reported that they have lived most of their lives North of the border (US), and English is preferred. However, for some, their preferred language changed overtime. Charlie reported:

Growing up I would speak Spanish because of my grandparents. For me, I feel language changes based on where you are located. In Sacramento, as a Mexican-American, I really feel more comfortable speaking English. When I was stationed in San Diego, I felt more comfortable speaking Spanish.

Other participants stated that Spanish is what they speak at home but they prefer to speak English at school or with their peers (n=6) because that is what most people around them speak, and they feel more accepted speaking English at school with professors and classmates. According to Omar, it depends on the situation and for him, “at school, I used English because it is the most spoken unless in Spanish class. With my peers, it all depends, mostly English, but I use Spanish with most of my Mexican friends.” Many participants (n=8) stated that they felt comfortable speaking both languages at school and with their peers, but for the most part Spanish is used at home since it is their first language. Also, a few (n=3) reported that using Spanglish comes natural since they live in an environment where there is a high concentration of bilingual peers. Gio pointed out
that Spanish is his first and primary language but at school he speaks English, “with my peers if they are bilingual like me, I speak a mixture we refer to it as ‘Spanglish’”.

Whether they prefer one language over another, all participants suggested that both languages come in handy depending on the place and the people with them, but they see being bilingual as an advantage because they can understand both languages. For many, speaking two languages helps them improve their working condition by breaking the stereotypical assumption that most Mexicans work in the fields because by being bilingual allowed them to get an education, join the military, or work on less arduous and better paying jobs.

**Education (School Risk Factors)**

Most participants (n=14) acknowledged that being Mexican-American affected them while they were in school. This affect is associated with the language barrier that all participants experienced growing up. Although, for several participants, their preferred language changed as they grew older, Andrew stated,

> I now identify myself more as an American than Mexican-American, but when I was younger I identified more as Mexican-American. When I started off in kindergarten, I didn’t know that much English, since I was the first born in my family, my parents will speak only in Spanish to me so I didn’t really know any English. So I had to do a lot of ESL English as a second language program but that helped me a lot. After that I got a better English education than most American kids that are born here with better vocabulary and speaking skills.

Despite the fact that many of the participants were born in California, they struggle with the language in the same manner as to those participants who were born in Mexico and migrated to the US at an older age.
One of the struggles that many (n=9) participants faced was discrimination and mockery from classmates including other Mexican-American because of their heavy accent and selective understanding of English. Pablo stated, “Since I came [to the US]at a much older age, it was difficult due to challenges like language and the knowledge about American culture in general like sports, clothes, bands, and foods”. Other participants believed that because of their accent they were discriminated against and marginalized into classrooms exclusively for non-English speakers. As Mario stated,

My first language was Spanish, however in preschool, because mainly primarily I was speaking Spanish, my English was broken so my teachers thought I had a learning disability. My parents knew I did not and that it was just that I was learning both languages at the same time, they stopped speaking to me in Spanish and only in English so that I would learn English and from there on I had to work on re-learning Spanish. Despite this hardship, I feel very proud of being Mexican-American and I am proud of my heritage and culture.

While several participants felt discriminated against because they were placed in alternative classrooms due to their broken English or accent, others (n=8) felt grateful to be labeled Mexican-Americans. According to Isaac, this label allowed him “to be part of special programs such as ESL or English as a second language and free after school programs for minorities”. Gio stated,

At the beginning of my elementary school years I had trouble understanding English, so I received special attention and I had tutors pull me out of class to teach me English because I was considered an English as a second language learner, but thanks to this service I was able to properly communicate after eight months of tutoring.

Tutoring services, ESL classes, and after school programs played a significant role in the lives of participants who utilized these services to help them learn English. Also, these classes helped them meet others who would not make fun of them because of the way
they talked. These programs were useful in learning English and American popular culture, and allowed them to socialize and acculturate gradually because they could relate to peers who understood the frustration of not understanding or speaking English.

Few participants (n=5) felt that being Mexican-American did not have an impact or affect them while they were in school since their home communities were predominantly populated by Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and other Hispanic nationalities. As a result, they were continually exposed to Mexican culture and language, even having classes given in Spanish. Manny explained that most of his peers were Mexican so he easily related with them. He stated, “being Mexican-American during grade school up to high school was a norm in the schools I attended cuz the predominant group was Mexicans and then blacks”.

Tony felt that his ethnicity along with his use of slang or broken English did not affect his education at all even though he was stereotyped as a ‘cholo’ because of the way he dressed. He stated that, “although teachers got a bad first impression of me with the way I dressed and the way I walked, I managed to have good grades up to high school and I even got a scholarship”. The way some Mexican-Americans dress automatically labels them even though they are not associated with gangs, but in the eyes of outsiders, they are gang members. In general, the majority of the participants experienced bias whether it was positive or negative because of their Mexican-American identity. For some the classes and programs provided in school helped them improve their
communication skills, while for others (n=9), they reported feeling discriminated against, and degraded despite being American citizens by birth.

**Family**

The interviews reaffirmed much of the existing research. All participants (n=18) believed that their families had the biggest impact on their development and lives. Most reported that their family provided the financial support they needed growing up. According to Pedro, “Finance wise, my parents were always there to help and support me with school, and if I needed money to go out, buy books and all that; they were always there to help me out financially up to this day”. Pedro said that his parents were upper middle class and he suggested that due to this status he had not encountered the financial struggles that many other Mexican-Americans faced. Mario acknowledged that his parents were middle class pointing out, “I feel that my family provided the financial support absolutely, I always had the clothes I needed for school, I always had food, I basically had everything a middle class child will have”. In contrast, other participants (n=7) reported that they only received enough financial assistance from their parents to meet their minimal needs. Gio noted;

I got what I needed, the basic needs like a roof over my head, food, clothes just the very basics and I would use clothes over and over the years. Funny, I still have clothes that I used to wear during high school and when I was 16. I started to work and I was able to buy things that I wanted and also I was able to help my mother out because she is a single mother.

Furthermore, Johnny felt that even though his family did not have many luxuries, his parents always supported him and his siblings. He noted, “We had shelter although it
was a one-bedroom apartment in a bad neighborhood but food and stuff for school were also provided, nothing fancy just the basics, so yeah my parents always provided until I started helping out too.”

Pablo added that financially, his basic needs were met because he never lacked for food, and he did not have to wear the same pair of jeans every day. He stated, “I didn’t have what I wanted but I had what I needed.” According to the majority (n=16) of the participants, none experienced a lack of financial support. On the other hand, two reported that despite always having food and a place to stay, they still had financial struggles. Ramon described his situation:

> When it came to financial support it was hard since I was raised by a single mom. There were times where we couldn’t do something or we didn’t have the same luxuries as other people or even my peers at school. We had financial difficulties throughout my childhood. I still remember both my brother and I not buying expensive clothing or shoes and we came to accept that matter and it helped us not put pressure on my mom to buy us new clothes since we were ok going to a second hand store.

Tony indicated that some of his family’s struggles included his parents living pay check to pay check, “but the important stuff was there food, shelter, clothes, and emotional support”. In many cases, emotional support is what prevented them from joining gangs.

**Emotionally**

Most respondents (n=10) stated that adequate emotional support was provided to them while growing up. Family unity is an important value in Mexican culture. Having the support from parents and siblings is a key cultural factor. Pedro recognized this saying, “My family comes from a long heritage in Mexico where family is an essential
part of our culture, and both of my parents taught me to show emotions and to not push your family away regardless of the circumstances.” Most participants stated that their parents showed support in their own way. Some rewarded them with clothes for school or trips to Mexico during the holidays. For a few respondents, both parents demonstrated that they cared for them by being involved with their education. Armando noted, “Emotionally, while in high school, I was hanging out with the wrong group of people and was expelled, but then both of my parents gave me the emotional support and encouragement to go back and graduate after I got kicked out”. Mario felt that both of his parents provided limited emotional support while he was growing up since both worked long hours. However, his grandparents gave him the support that prevented him from looking elsewhere. This is what may have prevented him from joining a gang since most of his friends became Norteños.

Interestingly, most of the participants (n=8) who felt that their emotional needs were filled by their family, stated that this support came from their mother. Two respondents felt they had the emotional support from both parents. Participants stated that most of the time, their father was busy working or worked two jobs, and did not interact or offer much emotional support from him. Joe noted, “Definitely the emotional support was there, although my dad worked all the time so he obviously was busy, but my mother made sure to be there for us like she will take us to school cook for us and talk to us.”

Others noted that despite growing up without a father they received the support they needed. Charley grew up in a poor neighborhood and never met his father. He said,
“My mother did the absolute best she could as a single mother. I never felt that I was without something growing up, but looking back I do feel that having my father around would have had a positive impact for me for sure.”

In contrast, many participants (n=8) felt that they did not receive necessary emotional support while growing up. These respondents assumed that because of a sense of masculine pride or ‘machismo’, their Mexican father did not show emotions. They reported the cultural stereotype that Mexican men do not cry. As Isaac put it, “Mexicans are too busy working to show weakness or emotions and women are too busy in the kitchen, taking care of kids, and working as well”. Contrary to these beliefs, Omar explained that growing up, he felt lonely since his parents were always working and when it came to emotional support, he did not receive any from his parents; therefore, he had to satisfy these needs on the streets. For Pancho, his early childhood memories are of a happy kid growing up in a nice neighborhood in Folsom, but he remembers that after his parents divorced everything went downhill. He stated, “After my parents’ divorce, there was no emotional support because my dad was working or drinking with his friends and my mom didn’t show a lot of emotions or affections due to having multiple jobs she was always busy and never home.”

Gio felt that due to the lack of emotional support from his parents, he ended up hanging out with the wrong crowd because he needed support and his friends were the ones who provided it. He stated that, “Emotional wise, my mom is kind of tough cuz she doesn’t show any emotions and it’s more like a negative reinforcement, which made me
want to look elsewhere”. By ‘tough’, Gio explained that his mom was very strict and always so busy that she never showed appreciation or feelings even when he did well in school and in sports. For him, his mother’s lack of emotions was a ‘negative reinforcement’, which was the primary cause why he spent more time hanging out with friends and gang members in his neighborhood because he felt an emotional connection with them.

From several participant’s perspective, lack of emotional support propelled them to seek support and attention elsewhere. Unfortunately, those participants who expressed a lack of emotional support from their family, ended up hanging out with the wrong crowd, experimenting with drugs and alcohol, breaking the law, and eventually affiliating with gangs. According to Shadow, a 29-year-old active Norteño member, his parents were never home because they worked all day; as result, he ended up wandering the streets and eventually joining a gang. He noted, “Emotionally, I hardly saw my parents and when I talked to them it was more because I got in trouble”. In addition, he acknowledged that since both parents had two jobs, he always had food and clothing nothing too fancy or top brands but he still got nice things; however, he said that he, would have sacrificed all the material things or even some meals, just to hear once that his parents cared.

Despite the fact that some participants had neither financial nor emotional support from their parents, they all stated that their family was very important to them regardless of their difficulties or struggles. Some stated that even with their bad decisions, their
family helped them recover from any adverse situation, and assured them they would not
do it again. Pedro reported that his family supported him through some “really bad
choices.” He feels that, “Every time I looked back, they are next to my shoulders, they
got my back.” Armando stressed that his family was his biggest support system and that
their love was always there, not like friends and money that come and go. His family was
a great support system, “my brother rehabilitated and left his gang, and they are also the
reason why I stopped doing drugs and hanging out with the wrong crowd.”

The majority of the participants emphasized that the family is the most important
‘thing’ in Mexican culture. Shadow noted, “No matter if you’re born stateside or in a
little town in Mexico, family is very important. For us, family is everything and I think is
the biggest thing in our Mexican culture.” Isaac added that family is, “very important.
They are the main people in my life and one of the main pillars in our Mexican culture.
Family comes first, above all.”

In contrast to this belief, Mario presented a religious perspective. For him,
“family is the second most important thing. My first is my faith in God and religion, but
for my family, I’m willing to drop most plans that conflict with my family plans, so I will
90% pick my family over anything else.” Religion is another main pillar in Mexican
culture because much of the Mexican population is Roman Catholic and celebrate
traditional religious holidays. Going to church as a family is a tradition that most
Mexican practice along with grocery shopping on Sundays after church. Whether the
participants were born in the United States or Mexico, or if they encountered family
difficulties during their upbringing or not, they associate family as a key element in their culture.

**Culture Conflict and Ethnic Identity**

Participants implied that the culture around them shaped and developed the identity. While several respondents (n=3) identify as American, the majority (n=11) identify as Mexican-American including those born in Mexico who are not US citizens and hold a permanent legal or non-legal resident status. Since the majority of the participants who were born in Mexico expressed that due to living in the US for the majority of their lives, they feel part of both cultures. As a result, some have been able to incorporate American values that have helped them improve their quality of life. Many (n=8) were brought to the US at a very young age and raised in California. Only one participant stated that he migrated when he was about 13 years old. These participants reported that since they spent most of their lives living in the US and were exposed to American culture, they viewed themselves as Americans. In addition, some specified that an immigration status does not influence how they identify themselves when it comes to their ethnic identity. Ramon reported that he did not know that he was living in the US illegally until he was in high school, when he wanted to get a driving permit. He said, “I didn’t even have a green card, but since I basically lived here my entire life I felt I was just another regular Mexican-American like my friends at school.”

Those participants identifying as Mexican-American, stated that for them, this represents being part of two cultures. Pedro reported that for him being Mexican-
American means, “to know two different cultures and be able to combine them into two different lives because in Mexico everything is completely different than what it is here, but being Mexican-American I can adapt to both sides”. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of celebrating and embracing American holidays, they view this as a way of assimilating into the American culture. For example, Tony explained that he has been living in the US since he was 2 years old, so he embraces the 4th of July and Thanksgiving because “it gives a sense to be thankful for the opportunities for a better life.” A ‘land of opportunities’ is what best describes Armando’s reflection of what it represents to be a Mexican-American. He stated,

To be Mexican-American represents more opportunities for sure, because I am a citizen I can basically get anything I want compared to someone that doesn’t have papers or doesn’t speak English. I speak English so just because of that alone I can get a better job compared to my parents that don’t speak it and had to work in the extremely hot fields for over 30 years.

Additionally, several participants (n=11) felt that holding Mexican-American status represents having the ‘best of two worlds’ since on the one side, they have a culture that is rich in traditions, and with the other they have a culture full of opportunities.

For Pablo, being Mexican-American represents pride. He states, “I am part of the Mexican culture and I practice my culture in any way I can. For the American part, I appreciate the opportunities and you can say I have the best of two worlds which have giving me the tools to succeed.” By being ‘part of the Mexican culture’, Pablo claims that regardless of where he lives, he is always going to embrace those cultural traditions
because that’s part of who he is, and nobody can take that away from him including with assimilation into a different culture.

Pablo explained that he feels very Mexican not because he was born there but because he embraces every aspect of that culture, from eating its foods, to going to church, and even speaking Spanish. Even though he is a permanent legal resident, he feels as American as a ‘peanut butter and jelly sandwich’ because this land opened the doors for him and his family, and thanks to that he was able to attend college and his parents have always had a job and even bought a house.

Charley grew up in a predominately white neighborhood, yet he has always taken great pride in being Mexican-American. He feels he is the definition of what it is to be a Mexican-American.

Being Mexican-American gives me the honor to be able to say that I am truly part of two very different yet close cultures in nature backgrounds. I feel that I embody the Mexican-American, I served my country, I am currently going back to school to earn an education and I am ensuring that my daughters understand the values of Mexican culture and identity especially with language.

While there are worthwhile things involved in embracing two cultures and identifying as Mexican-American, at least one participant added that despite never leaving the US, he believes that the fact that he was Mexican originally, American society views him differently compared to people from a European ancestry. According to Shadow, many ‘white people’ associate Mexican-Americans with gangs, drugs, and cartels, and this has led to labeling many young Mexican-American kids as deviant. For Shadow, being Mexican-American is hard because he must keep proving that negative stereotypes such
as being lazy are wrong, and that in fact, he is a hard worker just like those Mexicans working in the fields and in construction. However, he agrees that there are some flaws with both the Mexican and American culture, and this affects Mexican-Americans directly since they are in between both.

The negative stereotypes from both sides affect them. If he is around other Mexicans who are also Americans, they are called *pochos*, which to Shadow is a derogatory term referring to Mexican-Americans who are not Mexican enough. On the other hand, if they are around those of European or African descent, they are called ‘wetbacks’, a derogatory term for illegal Mexican immigrants despite holding legal resident status or being born in the US.

Ramon explained that most immigrants who are born and raised in Mexico have pride at a completely different level in the sense that they are proficient with their language and know about Mexican history, music, foods, and special holidays. For many Mexican-Americans or Mexican nationals raised in the US, it is hard to keep up with historical events, music, and language since they are not confident in their language use as they developed an accent that can be identified by a person who lives in or was raised in Mexico. This is what causes someone to be labeled a *pocho*, or someone who is not Mexican enough.

According to Shadow, being Mexican-American also represents, “taking the best from both sides and getting rid of the bad from both cuz in some ways Americans do some stuff better and in some ways Mexicans do some things better”. Many Mexican-
Americans can relate to this because they take advantage of the opportunities available in the US by working as hard as first generation Mexican immigrants. This entails the whole concept of searching and achieving the American dream, where many believe that with hard work anything is possible.

Although all participants expressed that both American and Mexican cultures are different in unique ways. They shaped who they are, although a couple (n=2) do not consider themselves to be Mexican-American. These participants stated that despite being born in the US, they are Mexican because that is who they are and how society identifies them. Joe explained,

To be Mexican-American it simply represents first a Mexican just being born here as an American because even though we were born here we are still on the Mexican side just by our looks to others we are still categorized as if we just jumped the fence yesterday, so that’s how I feel we are still Mexican just born here.

Like Mexican immigrants, Mexican-Americans are exposed to racial slurs, discrimination, marginalization, and stereotypes that degrade anyone of Mexican heritage. According to Isaac, “In the eyes of white people, all brown people are Mexican even if you are born here, so you don’t really get any special treatment.” Isaac added that a label of Mexican-American does not mean much to him because he sees himself as a Mexican even though he was born and raised in California and has never lived in Mexico.

It appears that all participants claim their identity based on the environment and culture that they are exposed the most. For example, if a Mexican-American is raised in a household where the parents only speak Spanish chances are those parents embrace their
Mexican culture. As a result, this individual will have a strong sense of his roots and will be more familiar and comfortable with Mexican culture. This will decrease the possibility that their culture will vanish, but it also makes it harder to assimilate. Evidence from the interviews, shows that all respondents claim that a language barrier was an issue they encountered since most of them grew up in families that were strongly influenced by their Mexican culture. Although, some participants, as they grew older, assimilated and accepted their American side.

Three participants, believed that they did not fit into the ethnic category or classification of being a Mexican-American or Mexican because the environment where they grew up fed their unique ethnic identity, which caused them to identify as Americans. Andrew, a third generation ‘Mexican-American’, does not believe he is either.

A Mexican-American is not something that I am. To me, I see a Mexican-American as someone like my parents’ generation in the between phase where they are still deciding whether they are going to have strong Mexican cultural practices or they just going to fully adapt to the new American culture. Basically, someone who is between assimilation and transition and in my case I have assimilated into the American culture therefore I am an American.

Manny is another participant who feels that to be a Mexican-American represents rejection from both sides and that in the end it is up to the individual to take the positive and negative from both sides, and utilize both for their own personal development.

Manny is proud of who he is and where he comes from, and despite not wishing to be classified as a Mexican-American, he views this from both a positive and negative perspective. He stated, “A positive is, I speak two languages and I know both cultures
and can adapt to either one. A negative is the rejection that I suffer from both sides.” He says that being Mexican-American means that you are neither Mexican nor American because when you are in America, you are not American enough, and when you go to Mexico you are not Mexican enough. These respondents emphasized on how hard it was to be a Mexican-American because the feeling is that they must be perfect in order to satisfy both cultures. They feel that by their physical appearance, they already have a disadvantage compared to those of European descent, and if they have a slight accent, they can be treated as if they just illegally crossed the border. On the other hand, if a Mexican national or immigrant notices an accent, they will be teased by them as well. However, the biggest advantage is that they can communicate in two languages and with this skill they can translate for family members and in some cases compete for better job opportunities.

Several respondents used a quote from a scene in the movie Selena where one of the characters states how hard it is to be a Mexican-American compared to other migrant ethnic groups. “We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time! It’s exhausting! Nobody knows how tough it is being a Mexican-American” (Quintanilla, Esparza, Katz, & Nava, 1997). This is a clear description of how many Mexican-Americans feel and the cultural struggle that they have to encounter because of their Mexican-American identity.

Participants were aware that by being born or raised in the US, they automatically inherit two cultures. One culture by having parents or grandparents who
came from Mexico, the other one by being raised in America. However, in the end, they feel it is about how the participant defines himself or how others define them. A person born in the US, automatically is a US citizen regardless of whether or not both parents are Mexican nationals, others can become naturalized US citizens. Nevertheless, at the end is all about how that person self-identifies, and in many cases it is the exposure to the culture what defines their identity.

The Importance of Acculturation

A factor that plays a significant role for Mexican-Americans or anyone who identifies as or is labeled a Mexican, is the acculturation process s/he encounters living in the US. Acculturation differs individually because not everyone is exposed to the same experiences or upbringing, or responds to any interaction the same way. For example, adapting to the mainstream American culture is going to be much easier for a participant who identifies as a third generation Mexican-American or who speaks little Spanish when compared to an immigrant who came to the US during high school and speaks little English. According to some participants (n=11), the less you are exposed to Mexican culture, the easier it is to assimilate into the American culture, while the ‘more Mexican’ you are the harder it will be to learn the language and assimilate. Most participants believe that the acculturation process has played an important role with them and their families.
Mario notes that acculturation played a significant role in his family and with the language they speak at home because his parents felt that he and his siblings needed it to learn English for school. He added, “Typical Mexican families do not promote education, so I feel that because of acculturation and being a third generation Mexican-American, it has been easier for me.” For Andrew, another third generation Mexican-American, the impact of acculturation is evident, and he believes his family is the textbook definition of acculturation. He explained,

My grandparents’ generation, they were born in the US but they were raised in Mexico and they came back here. Because of that, from my perspective, they have very strong Mexican culture from their food, habits, and the way they talk. My parents are more in between. They seem to understand and they keep up with more American traditions and expectations but they still have some of their Mexican culture still very obvious. But for my generation, me and my cousins, the culture is almost nonexistent it’s only shown when we celebrate events and stuff, so like when we have Christmas or Easter, things like that. The one trait that I see that stands out a lot and it carries over though out all the generations is the strong family bond that’s something I feel it came from the Mexican culture and has stayed.

Mexicans are known for having close bonds and relationships with their families and this attribute seems to survive despite how Americanized some have become. In some cases they have lost the language and some cultural practices such as religion and music, yet they still embrace the importance of having their family around.

A few participants noted that due to acculturation some traditions have been lost since each generation is becoming more Americanized with only a few traditions surviving especially with integrating or mixing and out-marriages and interracial/interethnic families. For example, Cinco de Mayo seems to be one of the few
traditions that has survived. Every year most Mexican-Americans look forward to this
day even if is just to party instead of acknowledging the actual meaning of the holiday,
which is the Battle of Puebla where Mexico defeating the French Army (Ramon, 2016).
According to Armando,

Some traditions have been lost due to migration from my grandparents from
Mexico, so my upbringing was more Americanized compared to them and now
with my nephews being half-white, their Mexican identity will be less but their
acculturation will be easier.

From some participant’s perspective, the main issue with acculturation is that the more
acculturated they become, the more their Mexican culture vanishes. Nevertheless, many
argue that their Mexican culture and heritage is what defines them, that they ‘always
remember’ where they came from, and that these traditions will be passed on from one
generation to the next.

Tony has been living in the US since he was a little over a year old and has never
been back to Mexico; however, he has never denied his culture or tried to avoid it.
Acculturation for Tony (2016) means incorporating American holidays such as
Thanksgiving because “it relates to us since it’s all about spending time with the family
and being thankful, and that relates a lot to our Mexican culture.”

In Mexican culture, the celebration of multiple holidays throughout the year such
as Independence day, Mother’s day, Batalla de Puebla, Día de los Muertos, and
Christmas, are an essential part of their life, and for many, celebrating such events is
necessary to be surrounded with their families. Therefore, for the majority, celebrating
any type of festival with their family is an important part of their experience, and when they celebrate American holidays this practice is an easy way to blend into that culture.

Ramon asserted that acculturation has played a significant role in his family’s life due to the fact that he and his brother had to adapt to new challenging customs.

A lot of people feel that acculturation is a hard thing to do but after embracing a new culture that’s what makes us human and keeps us moving forward like we celebrate Thanksgiving just like any other family in the US would. We also celebrate Halloween the same way. If it weren’t for acculturation, most of us wouldn’t have had an opportunity to succeed but obviously you want to keep your own background alive, yet assimilating shouldn’t be a bad thing at all.

Regardless of the potential benefits that rapid acculturation into the American culture provides, it is a difficult process due to their parents not wanting to let go of their Mexican traditions. For some participants (n=6), acculturation affected them less when compared to their parents who had language barrier issues and resisted learning new traditions.

Pedro stated, “Even though my parents moved from Mexico to the US thirty years ago, they still keep their ways as if they were in Mexico, they still don’t speak English and whenever they have to adapt to something they always reversed it to the Mexican way.” It is very common among first generation immigrants that despite of residing in the US for many years, some do not speak English. In many cases, they arrived as adults, did not attend American schools, and they came to the US exclusively to work. Therefore, they were too busy to attend classes and learn English. Others may simply have lived and worked in places surrounded by Hispanics where the majority spoke Spanish, so that they do not feel the need to learn a different language. Immigrants are required to make
changes in order to fit in, as Pedro mentioned they find ways to ‘reverse it’ to the Mexican way. For example, during Thanksgiving instead of cooking the traditional dinner with turkey, mashed potatoes, and sweet potato pie a way to ‘reverse it’ is to cook a traditional Mexican holiday dinner with pozole, tamales, and ponche.

Due to a lack of acculturation, many parents do not acknowledge the opportunities that they could get if they had been more Americanized. According to Omar, “a typical Mexican is expected to work in the fields or construction and not to attend college due to being marginalized from opportunities due to being a minority.” This is a popular belief for those who feel excluded from their communities due to their lack of assimilation; as a result, of their parents belief that they should just continue to work hard to provide to their family. Some (n=8) claim that in Mexico, for their parents, everything was different from food, customs, and you are expected to do things with your own hands, “You want milk, you’re going to milk the cow, you want to shower you have to heat the water.” From Gio’s perspective, “adapting into the American culture has some good things like living more comfortable and having more opportunities.” Unfortunately, many parents are not willing to assimilate and take advantage of the opportunities that such processes can provide for them and their children. Instead, they would rather live as if they were still in Mexico, which affected their children’s acculturation process.

The participants who had lived in Mexico, say that acculturation is difficult because they had to learn both cultures while maintaining their Mexican traditions, while adapting to a new land, and that learning English language was not easy. As Pablo noted,
“For me it’s been hard because since I was older when I came and was very used to Mexican culture and way of life. My parents have struggled since they always worked in the fields and were not exposed to the American culture.” For many (n=5), trying to adapt to a new culture and learning a new language at an older age was complicated, because of brain development and overcoming the use of their native language. This is where some have a more significant conflict in acculturating as compared to those who arrived or are exposed to the American culture and language at a younger age. Several respondents acknowledged that it was hard to get rid of their accent at an older age when compared to those who had learned while they were in preschool or kindergarten. In general, acculturation affected the participants in the sense that while they were growing up it played an important role in their development since they had to adapt to two different cultures. For the majority, a different language and their parents lack of knowledge of the American culture were the main factors that impacted their upbringing and the way they assimilated.

**The Influence of Peers**

From the perspective of most participants (n=15), at some point while they were growing up, they associated with or had peers who were not a positive influence on them. In most cases, this was due to the geographical location where they grew up. Many stated that their peers encouraged them to do things that they knew were wrong, but they engaged in them regardless because of peer pressure. According to Tony, the influence he
felt from his friends is the primary reason why he experimented with drugs and
associated with gangs. He stated,

I grew up in an area full of drugs at the time there was a lot of gangs, prostitution, and I had a lot of friends who didn’t finish high school and they just dropped out after freshman and sophomore year. Many of them will tell me that school was not important and that I could make more money selling dope or being just the middleman, so that’s how I started dealing and gangbanging.

Two participants stated that due to peer influence, they saw an opportunity to make money selling drugs, but this was a personal choice influenced by their peers rather than peer pressure. When their peers pressured them, respondents stated that they saw a reward such as money from selling drugs or status by wearing the colors of the neighborhood’s gang. On the other hand, when they were pressured to do things that they did not want to do such as assaulting someone or vandalizing property for no specific reason, they resisted, had second thoughts, or even felt appreciated. Ramon explained that due to his peers, he experimented with drugs, but that he is not the type of person who needed to try something and continue doing it. However, he reported that there was a point in his life when he decided to sell narcotics because his mother was sick, and his family did not have enough money to pay her bills. He stated, “I was making less than minimum wage working at a restaurant, and my coworkers, who happened to be gang members, introduced me to someone who provided me with narcotics in large amounts so I ended up selling them.”

Most participants contend that their relationship with peers was not positive, or that because their families were low-income Mexican immigrants, they were
marginalized into barrios or low-income sections in town. They believe that even if their parents could afford to live in a better area, they would have felt excluded from other ethnic groups, especially whites. As a result, most of these families felt more comfortable surrounded by other Mexicans. However, moving back and living in this environment added to the probability that they would experiment with drugs, engage in vandalism, and associate with gangs.

The Norteños and Sureños are the two gangs that respondents identified as the most prominent in their schools and the neighborhoods where they grew up in Sacramento. Several (n=8) identify as being members or having family and friends associated with these two gangs. According to Valdez (2007), gang members from southern California started using the term Sureño to identify as Southern gang members, while gang members in the north began using the term Norteño to refer to themselves and for the same purpose to identify where they were from.

Pancho, a former Norteño associate, explained the influence of peers and the location of his neighborhood and how this played a role in his youth.

In middle school, I was influenced by kids from my neighborhood to pick on other kids from different blocks, and some of them used to smoke weed and that’s how I got to try it. Another childhood friend had access to alcohol and that’s why I started drinking very young when I was like 11. Many of my homeboys from middle school joined gangs by the time we were in high school, I never got jumped in but always hungout with them and I wore red all the time too and represented Oak Park 100%.

Many participants considered that those peers who influenced them to do negative things did not have a positive influence while they were growing up. They believed that
crime, gangs, and narcotics were the norm since most of their peers were regularly involved or engaged in crimes and deviance. Joe believed, “you don’t really think about how bad stealing, smoking weed, or beating someone up just cuz he is from a different gang because is a normal thing to do and everyone does it.” These actions in the neighborhoods or barrios where many Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants live, are accepted because in the eyes of many, everyone is doing something. Whether they are consuming or selling drugs, joining a gang, robbing, or engaging in any at risk activity, they are all being exposed to them.

Living in these marginalized areas, it is hard to abstain from all of these activities because neighbors know or have a friend or family member who is involved in or was part of this lifestyle. Therefore, when youth socialize with others in their neighborhood, these actions are perceived as a normal part of their life because it is omnipresent and ubiquitous.

The majority of the participants repeated that they eventually came to a turning point in their lives and stopped hanging out with those individuals who did not have a positive influence on them. For many respondents (n=6), relocating from these areas decreased the likelihood for them to be exposed to drugs, crime, and gangs. Mariano believes, “my family’s geographical location decreased the probability of us joining a gang or a criminal organization by chance, specifically we moved out of South Sacramento which has a great number of gangs.”
In Sacramento, ‘South Sac’ is an area where many anti-social activities occur, for many, moving out from this area, decreased their exposure and chance for engaging in gang activity. In addition, some moved out of their neighborhoods to go to college, while others relocated due to their parents buying a home in a better neighborhood, or for better job opportunities. Omar stated,

I had friends in my childhood and in high school who influenced the way I dressed, they also encouraged me to steal and to try different drugs, but after high school I moved for college and stopped hanging with them, so they became acquaintances and we all took different paths in life.

On the other hand, those few participants that never left the areas where they grew up still associated with peers who influenced them to drink, experiment with and deal drugs, steal, and join gangs. According to Shadow, “I been living here since I remember, it all started sneaking out of school, stealing candy and beer, and dealing so I could buy clothes till I became a member and now nothing has really changed I still get high as a kite.”

Even though, most participants reported engaging in some type of deviant behavior, many stated that they stopped once they relocated. Their new communities, in a different geographical locations, offered less exposure to deviancy, so they made friends with people from different ethnic backgrounds not just other Mexicans. In addition, their new neighborhoods offered a better chance to assimilate into American culture because they are more diverse. Hispanics were a minority in these areas. As a result, they had less exposure to their culture and language. From bilingual schools, Mexican supermarkets, and street food vendors in every corner, displaying loud Mexican music all day long, and
a low percentage of non-Hispanic immigrant groups in these areas provided greater exposure and allowed them to continue to practice their Mexican culture at a full scale. Living in the *barrios* reduced the need to acculturate, or even the need to learn proper English since many parents rely on their children to translate.

The majority of the participants (n=16) who grew up in what is known or viewed as a bad neighborhood, acknowledged that due to the specific geographical location of their new residence, there was a greater opportunity to associate with peers who influenced them to do negative things. This created a higher probability for drug use, theft, and gang association. Johnny declared,

> In Sacramento, South Sac has a high probability for people to engage in crime because a lot of people are gang members and that’s where a lot of violence is at, lots of killings, gang recruiting, and clash of different cultures, so there is a lot of conflict. Now if you live in Granite Bay where most people have a really good income you don’t really have to fear for your life and you are not exposed to high levels of delinquency compared to South Sac where you fear for your life. So it’s just as Oakland is to San Francisco or Compton to Hollywood.

Most of the participants’ suggested that the low-income residential areas provided more opportunity for crime and a greater chance to follow their peers since their parents were busy working and were not involved in their children’s lives. Many reported that when people are young they will follow their peers, and if the neighborhood is underserviced, the residents lean toward criminal activities.

For Manny, it was normal to be part of a gang because it was easy to follow the crowd, and at that stage in his life being accepted into the group is important. Others felt that marginalization only makes situations worse. Tony asserted,
It comes to the point where you spend more time outside of home with your homeboys going to school and in between walking to school you see a lot of things for example I will see a lot of Norteño and Sureño graffiti, a lot of drugs being sold, a lot of prostitutes and druggies, so just being exposed to all that alone can influence a young person’s mind a lot, and if your friends exposed you to other negative things more than likely you’re going to follow them. For example, if you live in a poor community and your friends are making easy money, you have a greater chance of wanting to make that easy money for personal use and to help out your family too.

Participants argued that those areas where they grew up provided access to many things that could influence them to follow wrong path especially if their families were broken. According to Isaac, “if you grow up in the hood there is always a need for attention and if your parents are divorced or always working, you’ll get that from your peers but that could lead you to be a follower and do negative things and what not.” The connection between peers and geographical location, impacted their lives, and created a greater chance for deviancy and exposure to an environment where crimes and gang association are seen as a normal part of the daily routines of these respondents who live in these areas and associate with peers from those marginalized neighborhoods.
Chapter 5

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Discussion

This study explored possible factors that contribute to ethnic identity and culture conflict, and how they influence a group of Mexican-American men living in Sacramento, California. A review of literature identified certain risk factors: acculturation, culture, education, family, individual, peers, and community issues as significantly influential on these Mexican-Americans. Face-to-face interviews revealed that most of the participants’ verified assertions previously found in the literature, suggesting that factors such as these have always played a significant role in social development and perhaps even encourage engagement in crimes, deviance, and affiliation with gangs. The literature supports the impact of culture conflict and Vigil’s (1988) multiple marginality on these Mexican-American community members.

Vigil’s multiple marginality concentrates on explaining gang membership as it applies to minority populations. His original focus was with people of Mexican heritage from the barrios of Los Angeles, California, and later with other ethnic groups. Several conclusions can be deduced from these interviews and suggests that the effects of ethnic identity, the impact of culture conflict, and the effects of marginality on participants were encountered growing up in Sacramento.
Participants reported that a language barrier was the first obstacle they encountered, since Spanish was the language spoken at home. They describe this challenge and how it made them feel inferior and discriminated against when they were young, but eventually they came to recognize that being bilingual was an asset. Speaking two languages actually allowed some greater opportunities and greater appreciation of their parents had who had to settle for lower paying jobs because of their own language barrier. They agreed that speaking both English and Spanish helped them relate to both cultures.

The interviewees identified the financial and emotional support that their families had on their lives. As one respondent noted, “For us, family is extremely important. They are the main people in our lives. The family is one of the main pillars in our Mexican culture.” In spite of this, when their families failed to provide desired support or attention, some respondents (n=6) found it elsewhere. Often this led them to joining gangs or engaging in other questionable activities. For many participants (n=15), their neighborhood peers were the only options available to satisfy their needs and provide any guidance.

For all respondents, Mexican culture is what shaped their identity and contributed to the way in which they identified with American society. For some (n=3), it was less challenging since they were third generation Mexican-Americans, and viewed themselves as Americans regardless but who also had strong Mexican roots. Conversely, some participants (n=2) identified as Mexican despite being American born citizens. The
majority (n=13) identified as Mexican-American including those who were born in Mexico and held an illegal immigrant status (n=4). Finally, some participants (n=11) acknowledged that the impact their peers had on them when they were young influenced their entire life experience, from how they dressed to the deviant behaviors including gang affiliation, in which they participated.

Participants (n=15) further agreed that where they lived and were raised increased their chances of engaging in any type of crime, experimenting with drugs, and joining gangs. Because of their parents’ economic status, where they lived, “in a bad section of town”, they had greater opportunities to be influenced by those having deviant or criminal lifestyles. Many of their families were marginalized due to their socio-demographic and economic status. Many families simply felt more comfortable around those from the same ethnic background, who shared the similar views and perspectives, spoke the same language, ate similar foods, and shared cultural influences. As a result, they lived in these marginalized areas despite the discrimination they faced. This was where they felt at home, where they were around those who were like them. Living in these marginalized areas allowed most (n=14) immigrant families to cope in their new country. However, even those participants who were born in the US, felt the sting of bias, and exclusion from the cultural mainstream.

In order to comprehend why these Mexican-Americans struggled in trying to acculturate in the American mainstream society, we must understand the impact that culture conflict had in them. In many cases, this conflict caused insecurity due to their
struggle in defining their ethnic identity. Most of these participants (n=17) stated that language was the primary challenge that made them feel insecure due to not being able to understand and communicate. In addition, the fact that English native speakers and even fellow Mexican-Americans routinely made fun of them made it more difficult to acculturate.

For many, defining who they were based on their culture was what compelled them to affiliate with those who shared the same beliefs, traditions, and most importantly, the same language. As a result, they engaged in stealing, experimenting and distributing drugs, and affiliating with or becoming members of a gang. These were the outcomes of growing up in marginalized areas where peers encouraged these types of behaviors.

Several respondents (n=9) stressed that other disadvantage communities such as African-American and Southeast Asian ethnic groups such as Hmong and Vietnamese living in South Sac also encountered similar problems living in these type of neighborhoods. However, they felt that as Mexican-Americans it was more complicated to acculturate because they had to overcome the language barrier. In addition, due to the close proximity to Mexico, it was hard to detach from their home culture because they were able to travel back and forth easily which allowed them to maintain their cultural traditions.

Overall, the majority of the participants (n=16) related to Tony’s statement, “Growing up in South Sac, you tend to follow the people you kick it with, so you kind of follow the crowd and usually those friends are doing bad stuff like dealing, stealing, and
some are gang-banging.” Most participants acknowledged the effects of their ethnic identity, which focused on the risk factors that increased culture conflict as they tried to acculturate into the US mainstream.

**Conclusions**

Because of my own history and where I grew up, I also had assumptions about being Mexican-American, and had similar experiences as did many of these participants. These participants faced many challenges related to their families, peers, culture, and their first language. However, in spite of any short-comings these experiences caused, they highlighted the importance of the neighborhoods (geographical location) where they grew up, as strongly influencing whether they were involved with criminal activity, deviancy, and gang affiliation. Overall, their responses focused more on the negative effects of acculturation with very few positive examples which highlighted the advantages of being bilingual.

Trust was a critical factor during these interviews. Several participants stated that they had experimented with or sold drugs in the past, and they were uncertain about participating. However, as the interviews progressed, they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences, commenting that they might not have if I was not Mexican myself. Trust concerns involved those who claimed affiliation or gang membership because their answers were initially very curt and vague. However, as the interview developed, their responses became more detailed and in the end, a few even appeared to be excited to share their experiences. One participant stated that he was more than happy to tell his
story because he believed that everyone should take advantage of the opportunity to share theirs.

At the beginning of each interview, most were nervous due to their concern with confidentiality and wondering if what they said could affect their safety. In order to calm their fears, I explained who I was, and told them that I was familiar with their situations because of my past and where I grew up. In the end, those participants most concerned with their confidentiality, said that the fact that I was also Mexican-American made them feel better, and that they could trust me because I could relate to them and would not judge their actions.

**Recommendations**

Collecting data from a larger sample would improve validity and generalizability. Longitudinal studies allow observations and the collection of data of similar phenomenon over a period of time (Babbie, 2013). Therefore, if this study was expanded to include participants from other backgrounds, it may produce results of greater generalizability impact that are still associated with the geographical location and risk factors highlighted in this research. Also, it may provide a clearer description of which risk factors affect or have a bigger impact based on the peoples’ culture and ethnic identity. These findings may contribute to the development of programs that can better help at risk communities, and provide understanding of the needs of those marginalized youth who face challenges based on their ethnic origins, cultural identity, or social status.
Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve a face-to-face interview where you will be asked questions about your demographics (age, place of birth, languages), education, family, culture, friends and social problems. My name is Harol Pineda Chavez, and I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento, from the Criminal Justice Department.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even after you verbally agree with this informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your place of residence (Sacramento region), ethnic background (Mexican-American), and age group (18-30 years old). The purpose of this research is to find factors that may contribute to the possible explanation for how ethnic identity and culture conflict shaped and develops within a group of Mexican-American men in Sacramento, California. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in a face to face interview where you will be asked questions regarding demographics, education, family, culture, peers, social problems, and association with criminal organizations. Also, your interview will recorded with a digital audio recording device. Your participation in this study will last approximately 40-60 minutes once the interview is completed.

There are some possible risks involved for participants. There is a risk that during the interview you may feel uncomfortable or emotional when asked to provide personal information. Another risk is that you may feel guilty or embarrassed to share information about your past, family and friends. There are some benefits to this research, particularly this research will benefit society by clarifying the assumptions suggesting that some males who identify as Mexican-American may possibly encounter ethnic identity and culture conflict issues that might lead to social problems.

Measures to insure your confidentiality are using pseudonyms (nicknames, aliases, superheroes, or numbers) to protect your identity. Therefore, I will not use your name, and I am the only person who will have access to your information. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of 3 years after the study is completed.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at (916) 834-6968 or email me at Hp683@csus.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a
participant in a research project please call the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) XXX-XXXX, or email irb@csus.edu.

By participating in this interview you have provided verbal consent which indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.
Appendix B
Interview Questions

Demographics

How old are you? /Years

Where were you born?

How long have you been living in the United States? (If you were born outside the United States)

How old were you when you first came to the United States?

How long have you been living in the Sacramento region?

What is the primary language and/or what language do you prefer to speak?

A. what language do you prefer to speak at school and with your peers? Please explain.

Education

How many years of schooling have you completed? /Years

What is your highest level of education?

What is your parents’ highest level of education?

Are you currently or have you attended any youth programs in your community? If yes, describe what programs.
What do you normally do during your free time?

Have you ever participated in programs such as Boy Scouts, Boys & Girls Club, Little league, Youth Soccer, YMCA, Big Brother, or others?

Being Mexican-American had any effect while you were in school?

**Family**

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Are you married? If so, do how many children do you have?

Which family member do you believe is the one who makes the most important decisions for your family?

Do you feel your family provided the emotional and financial support that you needed growing up? Explain your answer.

How often do you feel that you do not belong to your family?

Have you ever felt that your parents love your siblings more than you? If yes, please describe how or in what sense.

How important is your family to you? Please explain.

When it comes to making decisions, has your family consulted you for any advice?

**Culture**

How much do you know about traditional Mexican cultural values?
Do any traditional Mexican cultural values remain strong in your family?

How much do you appreciate Mexican culture?

Do you feel acculturation has played a significant role within your family and yourself? If yes, please explain.

What does it represent to you to be Mexican-American?

Have you experienced any difficulties or hardships trying to assimilate or adjust to the American culture?

Has living in the United States affected your appreciation of the Mexican culture (roots)?

**Peers (Friends and Family)**

From your perspective do you have friends that do not have a positive influence on you?

Have you ever been involved with any activities that are considered illegal or that violates the rules, such as skipping school or stealing?

Have you ever missed several school days because of the influence or your peers?

Have you ever been asked by your peers or family members to do things that you know were wrong and/or against the law, but you still end up doing it regardless?

Do you have friends or family members that use or have been exposed to drugs and/or alcohol? If yes, explain scenario or situation?

If yes, have you ever been encouraged to use drugs or drink alcohol with them?
Social Problem Association/Relationship

Overall, how many people do you know that currently are active members of organizations forming criminal participation or who belong to a peer group such as a clique, posse, crowd, mob, or crew?

Have you ever been a member of a gang?

If you are not currently a member or associated with a criminal organization, what is the likelihood that you or a family member may someday join or associate with one?

When it comes to criminal participation, do you think the environment such as the geographical location of your family’s residence may create a greater chance for you to become a gang member not by choice but by chance?

What do you believe are the main reasons Mexican-American youths and other ethnicities/cultures such as Hmong, Vietnamese, African-Americans, Whites, and Russians living in Sacramento may join gangs?
## Appendix C

### Sub Identity by Risk Factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mexican</th>
<th>Mexican-American</th>
<th>American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>11 prefer Spanish</td>
<td>18 Bilingual</td>
<td>7 prefer English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/Identity</td>
<td>4 identify as Mexican</td>
<td>11 identify as Mexican-American</td>
<td>3 identify as American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-Demographics:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25 and 27 years old.</td>
<td>18-30 years old.</td>
<td>23, 28, and 30 years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival to US</td>
<td>Between 1-13 yrs. old.</td>
<td>7 born in California outside the Sacramento area.</td>
<td>3 born in Sacramento.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>High school (2), GED (1), some college (1).</td>
<td>High school (2), GED (2), Trade school (2), some college/college graduate (4), Military (1).</td>
<td>High school, some college, college graduate (3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>High school (3)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#1 Andrew  #2 Pedro  #3 Tony  #4 Ramon  #5 Joe  #6 Gio  #7 Mario  #8 Shadow  #9 Pancho  #10 Armando  #11 Johnny  #12 Charley  #13 Omar  #14 Isaac  #15 Pablo  #16 Manny  #17 Mike  #18 Geronimo

X
References


