

The history of gangs and how gangs operate has always been a wide topic that has been talked about throughout the media. Whether it be about the control they have in specific neighborhoods or the violent actions of gangs throughout the years, there will always be the topic of gangs arising in some way. I decided to take a further look at gangs to see how they impact the youth. In this case, I wanted to take a closer look at the neighborhood of Mission located in San Francisco, CA. Diving into the rich history of the Mission District, the Mission carries a big population of Latino descent. This area carries a lot of culture and currently holds a traditional festival on November 1st and 2nd for Dia De Los Muertos, this place has always been recognized as the Latino district of San Francisco. However, with that history also comes the history of gangs in San Francisco, specifically the Norteños and Sureños gang. Dating all the way back to the 1950s-1990s the Norteños and Sureños are a popular gang that has deemed the Mission District as part of their territory. The Norteños and Sureños history starts due to the prison system here in California separating and becoming into a fight for territory. Throughout the years there have always been fights for this territory, bringing fear and violence to the communities, but how did these gangs even come to be? To know why gangs end up having a high population of young people joining them, we must first acknowledge the history of why gangs were even created in the first place, or more so why the name of “gangs” even came to be. By knowing the history of the Norteños and Sureños along with the effects it has on the youth that join, showing off the impacts of gangs for youth communities.

Critical Social History

The Mission District is one of the most historical districts in San Francisco, CA because it was known as one of the main places with a huge population of Latino immigrants and Latino culture in that area. To figure out more of the history of the Mission District, I decided to interview my brother who was born and raised in San Francisco and spent most of his time in the Mission District. Using previous articles; I decided to ask questions and seek answers based on personal experiences and the research that I conducted. It was time to see exactly how youth gangs were impacted in the Mission District and how history about youth gangs came to be as an important factor to know and acknowledge.

How did youth gangs come to be in San Francisco? For background, Norteños and Sureños started off as a gang in Southern California after the prison system decided to separate. Once that happened, many started to fight for territory, thus the Norteños claimed the Mission District as their main area. This became one of the main reasons why these gangs emerged in the Mission District. However, there must be another reason why they decided to reside in the Mission District for a while. As my research suggests there are multiple reasons why the Norteños remained in the Mission District. During the interview with my interviewee (Arturo Paredes, 2025), there was one consistent reason that kept being brought up in the conversation for why a lot of young people were drawn to gangs, one of these reasons being acceptance. Through the article by Jonah Owen Lamb (2022), it is shown that within gangs there is this sense of community that gangs seem to attract the youth with, giving them a sense of acceptance. In the interview that was conducted it was stated that in present day, the Mission District is becoming more gentrified and there is less of a community now more than ever. Of course, there were signs of gentrification starting in the 1990s, but nowadays it is more obvious than it was before as there is no longer a sense of community when the Mission District is brought up, there is mainly a sense of reminiscing of what the district used to be. This leaves many people longing for someone to not only understand their struggles, but their culture as well.

It is important to know how much the Mission District has been impacted throughout the years. In the 1990s in the article “Category: Mission” published by Foundsf (2015), it is shown that the Mission District was described as “ghetto”. The word “ghetto” is used in a negative way to imply that something, in this case, an area is dangerous to go or reside in. Many children that grow up knowing they were raised in the “ghetto” grow with this mentality that they will never be successful because of where they were born and raised. This can also be seen in recent years, with interviewee Arturo Paredes, stating that in the days he worked as an afterschool mentor many children were shocked to be achieving their dreams because of where they were raised or they already had the expectation that they will not make it too far in life. As a student who spent most of his years around the Mission District, Arturo describes that the people and his

fellow classmates around him were always surrounded by police officers, fear of violence, and had low faith in their future. This perception of being seen as dangerous has more impact on a young person than many seem to realize. By stating or making people seem as dangerous, many youths start to have a notion of who they are or how the public perceives them. A perception of danger leads many young people to find themselves lesser and more dangerous to the people around them.

So, how exactly are youth gangs impacted by the economic aspect of these structures of power as well? In the Mission District, Arturo stated that a lot of businesses have moved out of the area during recent years. This can be a common cause of gentrification, which has been more prevalent in the 1990s and until recently became more evident after Mark Zuckerberg bought a house in the Mission District. Due to this effect of gentrification and multiple small businesses closing, youth gangs or the Norteños and Sureños have not been as present in recent years, but there are still signs of violence occurring due to turf wars. A loss of culture is also mainly seen to impact multiple youths resulting in not feeling like belonging, thus looking for a community where they can relate to.

Youth gangs like the Norteños and Sureños grew in the Mission District due to the feeling of wanting acceptance in young people's eyes. Although they are not as prevalent as they were back in the 90s, youth gangs were made to fight for territory along with being built off from the idea of community and a sense of trust. The youth need a safe place where they can express their culture and also feel accepted. Both gangs in this instance grew due to the feeling of community and reliability. Not only was gentrification a big factor of losing culture, but it also was a factor in the youth feeling alienated.

Dehumanizing Discourse

Discourses of power have always been a topic worth discussing since it ties into the perspective of how youth "gangs" are perceived to the public. As stated by De la Tierra, "Discourse of power is the way dominant institutions use language to support and perpetuate dominant relations of power in society" (De la Tierra, 2025). Discourse of power is mainly used to dehumanize and strip away any dignity which in this case can correlate to the response of youth gangs. Due to dehumanizing language, the media and the people that choose to consume harmful media grow to have a negative perception on youth gangs. The terms "boys" and "delinquents" are used to diminish the youth, making them seem as lesser. As a form of retaliation "youth gangs", or in this case young people, grow to feel unaccepted and pressured into this box of expectations of what they are told to be rather than embracing who they are. In another perspective critical discourse analysis is the ability to understand the impacts of power dynamics, social structures, and themes in stories or discussions. One prominent moment this can be showcased in was in "Why Gang Members are Dehumanized in Court" (Hagedorn, 2022) where a lot of discussion revolved around the impact of gang violence. One such case being, where a girl shot a person with the intention to shoot her stepfather, bringing into discussion the topic of how child abuse is typically handled in the court of law. This does involve the insight and importance of critical discourse analysis as it allows discussion of how the youths are portrayed in situations. Mainly for this case bringing into light how the media portrays the youths that join these gangs.

The first article "Sureños, Norteño Rivalry Endures" by Monica Vaughan talks about the way both of these youth gangs impacted their communities with violence. "Three Norteño Gang Members Who Murdered Victims in San Francisco Sentenced to Decades in Prison Following Their Convictions on Racketeering Conspiracy Charges" is a news outlet posted by Justice.Gov that dives deeper into a former gang member who committed multiple crimes under the Norteños name in San Francisco. In another article, "In San Francisco, How Gangs Are Defined Is Up for Debate" by Jonah Owen Lamb, Lamb talks about the treatment within the criminal law system of a Norteños gang member, or more so how there is a huge neglect of backstory within gangs. For how the CDA was conducted it was important to view a lot of these cases through a lens of how the institution portrays youth gangs and the impact they have on the community. Thus, it was prominent to also know the history of both gangs.

The dominant discourse about the Norteños and Sureños revolved around the violence that was happening within San Francisco and the background of how the Mission District was impacted. For example, in Vaughan (2015), they stated, "Agents who provide witness testimony as gang experts testify the Norteños take their commands from Nuestra Familia, a prison gang started for "northerners" protection

against the Mexican Mafia, which now direct the Sureño foot soldiers,”. The main discussion here revolves in the ongoing war between both the Norteños and Sureños and the violence that they bring within the communities. This can also correlate to the article posted Justice.Gov (2023), “Madrigal admitted he committed these two murders in part to earn respect from other SFMD Norteños and to enhance his status in the gang”. This is interesting to note since it gives a bigger insight into why violence is committed, gaining respect and a sense of trust within the Norteños gang. For youth gangs there is always the conversation revolving around violence committed, especially by their own hand. As it is known by Jonah Owen Lamb (2022), “Madrigal admitted he committed these two murders in part to earn respect from other SFMD Norteños and to enhance his status in the gang”. These gangs are made to show the media that they will not be dehumanized, also known as a form of retaliation. By attracting a sense of community, the youths that get insulted tend to look for acceptance by these gangs, but how exactly does this correlate to injustices?

After careful reflection, it is important to consider that youth gangs are mainly made because they want to have a sense of community. That does not mean that they are good because they still experience violence at the end of the day, however it brings in an insight of how the youths are treated by the media or the people that they are surrounded by. Due to dehumanizing languages and views the youths turn to gangs for acceptance. This ties in with how injustices tend to make the youth feel isolated and turn to a community where they will feel accepted.

Counter-Narrative

History is always an important thing to note in how gangs were made. In this specific case, a lot of gangs started off as communities that wanted to resist and defend themselves from police brutality. Resistance can be done in multiple ways; however, it is shown more in actions. Brotherton (2008) states, “resistance begins with small oppositional gestures that are aimed at existing power relations as they have been conceived, broadly, in both the Foucauldian and Weberian traditions,”. This concept in understanding youth gangs is incredibly important because most youth gangs are made as an oppositional force. Young people in these communities join gangs to resist a specific institution, mainly institutions that treat them as criminals or lesser beings. These gangs were created and started to grow because to the youths, they build communities where one can go too to feel a sense of self, albeit with the cost of violence.

In the film titled “The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation” also known as AMLKQN, they are a group or as stated a “political organization” that fought for their community. It started out as a group that wanted to protect the Latino community against injustices and violences done by institutions. In the film, the Latino community was shown to go through discrimination and were treated unfairly by law enforcement or their state officials. Multiple young people were tired of this treatment and decided to make this group in order as a form of protest. However, over the years they have evolved into a gang that as stated in the documentary, has become violent.

As said in the documentary, there are multiple instances where people were individually targeted by police officers. Throughout those instances the criminal justice system is shown to be unfair. Tone, a member of the organization, has his situation brought up where officers set him up with possession of weapons when Tone never had a weapon to begin with, yet they insisted that he should be arrested for possession of a weapon. These instances are the reason this group was created and why Tone decided to change the mission and purpose of this organization, to fight back the institutions. For a community to protest the unfair treatment that they are faced by officers and people on a daily basis.

Tone, also known as Antonio Fernandez, is the leader of The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation organization. While being the leader of this organization, Tone has expressed going through multiple instances where he was mistreated by the institution. Instances where Tone was searched endlessly by officers insisting on weapon possession only to have nothing. Tone with the ability of this organization is able to shed light to police violence and the injustices communities face under police supervision. As stated in the film, “we live in two societies... guilty until proven innocent”. Tone leveraged cultural pride to promote activism and social change because he talks about not only the violence that is being done to the community, but the urgency for unity to fight against this violence. The light being shed about the injustices in these communities is the ability to resist as well, the power to fight back. In this instance, Tone

allowed this organization to show that the communities will not stand back on this violence. It is his mission not only to unite these communities, but to have a positive change as well, one where everyone can unite and talk about their cultures. His goal was always to uplift the youth and strive for a change.

The example of AMLKQN under King Tone changes the dominant narratives of gangs being seen as violent or criminal because it sheds some light to the history of why these gangs were created. It is important to uplift the histories of resistance in youth communities because it also undoes the narrative of the youths in these gangs only being people that are nurtured with violence. Most gangs were originally created as a form of resistance against a system that only worked to hurt them. This can be applied to the local context about justice, dignity, and community because it gives an insight into how gangs grow and what their purpose was. It started out as a sense of resistance and to highlight the injustices within the institutions.

Aftermaths of Gentrification

Taking into account gang presence in the early 2000s means that there also has to be an acknowledgement for why these youth gangs have "disappeared". First, it is important to know how the Mission District was originally known as the “Latino District”, known for the culture there was and how connected the Latino community was to each other. Slowly as the years went by with technology making its way into San Francisco many of the previous community has left behind a significant impact of what the Mission District used to be. Gentrification is such an impactful topic to talk about when it comes to youth gangs due to how prominent its effect had on the Mission District. When it comes to media and how it portrays the multiple aspects of the Mission District, they all have a connection. For one we see that the media heavily disregards the real issues, reporting on the violence. It is important to consider the negative effects of gangs such as the harm they may be causing, but there has never been a deep dive to how it truly affects the youths and why the youths choose to join these gangs. Raygoza (2012), talks about the effects gentrification had on the community. With businesses closing down and the fight to make income for their families, Raygoza speaks on why there is such an effect on these communities. One main argument is that although gangs in the Mission District are no longer as prevalent as they used to be, what once was fear walking through the Mission District wearing red or blue now comes a time where the biggest fear is the loss of culture and community. Although gangs are no longer prevalent in the Mission District, we are left with the aftermath on the effects of community. Rayogza explains this well by stating, “It was forgotten that behind the boutiques and high end restaurants there is a world of gangs who kill and die for the colors red and blue. The community fights for the soul of these men and women while at the same time it fights to remove them from society.” By acknowledging the negative impacts of gangs, the media clings onto the narrative that gangs were created purely to install fear and hurt to others. However, they choose to ignore the second half, the half that talks about the erasure of culture. The youths not having a space to connect with their roots, know more about their cultures. Instead of bringing in a focus on what the youth needs they cling only to the negative aspects of gangs, ignoring the fact on how gangs started which is a form of retaliation against oppression in the system. This, as Raygoza mentioned, is the media leaving men and women to fight a war where they no longer want violence, but they do not want what's left of their culture to become a distant memory and to be discriminated against.

Inspiring Conclusion

So, what exactly can we learn from this experience? The main goal was always to dive deeper into the history of the Norteños and Sureños impact in the Mission District of San Francisco, CA, but as more information shows there are clearly multiple aspects to gangs in the Mission District. One thing that was seen often was just how much history there is when it comes to cultural impact. The interview that was conducted not only shed some light on how youth gangs were impacting the community, but it was also able to shed some light on how other factors impacted the Mission District as well such as how economically and socially gentrification has impacted young people. Being able to see dehumanization being shown frequently in youth gangs through the media or institutions. The strong sense of making these youth gangs as only “gangs”, “ghetto”, or “violent” when there is so much history pointing to a deeper cut of what these youth gangs are, formed to feel a sense of community and retaliation against oppressive

institutions. Lastly, the narrative youth gangs are given. Seen with the AMLKQN project by King Tone, what started off as a group formed to retaliate against police brutality grew into something much bigger. This growth is forming a sense of community, trust, and reliability, but why does this research directly correlate to Norteños and Sureños. Well, both communities are dominantly Latino. In the Mission District there has been a history with Latinos being mistreated by police officers and even nowadays still being targeted by larger institutions. Not only just that, but with the rising evidence of gentrification the Latino community has been heavily impacted by the actions of these effects. A lot of young people, mainly Latino immigrants or first generation Latinos feel lost and confused with their culture. Not having a sense of community, trust, or reliability often leads to the youths turning to gangs to feel accepted or a sense of belonging. This project made me realize multiple things. The fact that the media not only started to villainize "gangs", but also how much gentrification contributes to the growth of gangs. The youth is not supported enough and here in the Mission District do not have a safe space where they can fully embrace their culture. Instead of villainizing or negatively berating the youth, we need to do better. Build communities, make friends, have safe spots and celebrations of your culture. Embrace who you are and support the people around you. Not only was I able to see just how much community is important in these cases, but I was able to see just how much the youth can truly impact our future. Instead of beating them down, we need to lift them up and show just how important their ideas truly are.

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