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Barrios and Gangs

Being in the neighborhood it becomes a family. The . . . family you don't have at home . . . Like the homeboys . . . and the homegirls . . . become like a brother and sister to you . . . We're bonded . . . And that becomes our neighborhood . . . It becomes like . . . our house. You know, that's were we live. That's where we hang at . . . And we take care of that neighborhood and we don't allow nobody to come in and destroy it or come in our area.
—Sonia

Often alienated from their parents and other adults in their lives and discriminated against as poor and working-class women of color, Chicana youths developed closer ties in their barrios with their homegirls and homeboys, many of whom were gang-affiliated. "Homies" included siblings and male and female peers and partners. Their peers, however, were only partially able to meet the emotional and economic needs of Chicanas. In some cases, the abuse Chicanas experienced in their homes was reproduced in their relationships with homies, particularly sexual partners.

For a significant number of Chicanas/os, barrio associations did not lead to involvement in illegal activities (Yolanda). For pintas interviewed, however, such ties, combined with their addiction to drugs and limited economic and educational opportunities, eventually led them to break the law. Those who joined barrio gangs were more likely to come in contact with already biased law enforcement officers. Although some lawbreaking was sponsored by gangs, other activities took place with gang members but were not gang-sponsored (Jankowski 1991; Vigil 1988).

Several assumptions underlie the discussion of gang activities in this chapter. Chicana/o youth groups, including gangs, challenge mainstream society in multiple ways and exhibit symbols of ethnic pride (Mirandé 1987). Likewise, they demand an end to the discriminatory

implementation of criminal justice policies, such as police brutality and harassment of Chicana/o communities. As a result, they play political functions of various sorts in communities besieged by poverty, racism, and discriminatory criminal justice policies.[1]

Nonetheless, the existence of Chicana/o gangs has been used by the media, social scientists, and government agencies to successfully criminalize Chicana/o youths by portraying them, in general, as "dangerous 'gang members' or 'gangsters'" (Mirandé and López 1992: 17). The fact that some gangs and individual gang members victimize others does not take away the potential for many of them to play positive political roles in their communities (Brotherton and Barrios 2004; Jankowski 1991; Mirandé 1987).

It is within this context that a few studies have explored Latina participation in barrio gangs.[2] This chapter provides brief sketches of Chicana involvement in gangs during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Two of my primary concerns were to identify the motivations Chicana youths had for joining gangs and how these were related to earlier childhood experiences. Other key questions were: What types of support did Chicanas receive from homies, primarily those who were gang-affiliated? How different was the participation of Chicanas and Chicanos in gangs and gang activities? How did gang activities expose them to come in contact with criminal justice agencies? What impact did Chicanas' drug addiction have on gang membership?

Joining Barrio Youth Gangs

Chicana/o gangs have existed in Southern California since the 1920s (Harris 1988). Most are divided into subgroups or cliques (*klikas*), usually based on age, sex, and/or geographic lines.[3] Chicanas have formed part of mixed Chicana/o gangs from the beginning (Moore and Hagedorn 2001), either integrated with men or forming all-female cliques within them. Chicanas have also formed separate women's gangs, some of which are affiliated with male gangs through alliances (Harris 1988; Miranda 2003; Moore 1991). All the former Chicana gang members interviewed for this book had been members of female cliques within mixed gangs.

Although most gang-affiliated Chicanas limited themselves to barrio youth gangs, a few participated in actions sponsored by larger organized Chicano gangs such as the Mexican Mafia (EME).[4] EME, nonetheless, included many members of barrio youth gangs from Los Angeles.

At least 10 of the 24 pintas interviewed joined gangs as teenagers.

At the time of the interviews, some were still considered gang members by homies although they had withdrawn from active gang participation years before. Joining gangs fulfilled multiple needs.

Sonia: You drift away from your parents . . . especially if . . . you're with young parents . . . I mean, they're . . . into their own thing, you know. My mother and father . . . worked all day long, but when they came home they drank and weekend parties and playing cards, dancing. And . . . we're taught children are to be quiet . . . And . . . you just listen and let the parents do the talking, you know, or the decisions. So it's kind of hard trying to grow [up].

Sonia also found in gang membership a degree of freedom from traditional gender roles she did not enjoy at home (see Moore 1991). Reconciling the conflicting expectations of family and peers was nonetheless difficult.

I was living like two lives, trying to please my friends, trying . . . to please the neighborhood, and still trying to please my parents. 'Cause I was . . . my daddy's little girl . . . so he wouldn't allow me to go out or anything . . . Like my brother was allowed to go and do whatever he wanted, but he's a man . . . So I took it upon myself to do it my way . . . I was like really living two lives because I was not permitted to be in no gang. It was all behind my mother's and father's backs. You know, I was going to school with the Oxfords and the pleated skirts and the bubble hairdo back then . . . So when my mother and father used to go to work . . . I'd change clothes . . . and then by the time they came home I changed to my clothes that they knew I wore . . . Here my mother and father training me or teaching me go the right road, go to school and give me everything I need, but I ditched and I took those pills . . . You know . . . going to parties . . . hanging out at somebody's house . . . They didn't know 'cause they were at work.

Sonia's dilemma reflected what Moore and Mata (1981) have pointed out, that Chicana "girls have stepped further from the community expectations when they join the gang than do boys" (49). That is, gang lifestyles took them further away from gender role expectations that sought to restrict them to the home, the family, and the church (although economic conditions also forced many Chicanas to work outside the home). Hence, for most Chicanas/os, "the norms of the gang were in direct conflict with the wishes and desires of their parents" (Harris 1988: 155) and the larger Chicana/o community (Moore 1991; Torres 1979).

Gang membership satisfied the need of Chicana adolescents to belong and feel socially recognized and respected.

Graciela: They made you feel like . . . you're somebody, you know. Because you're recognized wherever you go. When you're in a gang people know you.

For others it was the desire to share gang activities with male partners or gain more personal power that attracted them to the gang.

Paula: A lot of 'em . . . it's because their man is in it . . . And, off the top, you know, they follow the old man . . . But . . . it's still like it is back then, you know, to make a name for yourself, to . . . look like you're the "big somebody."

Sonia: I used to go with a boyfriend . . . I was sneaking around, seeing him at the age of 12 years old . . . He had already been in to YA . . . He was from the same neighborhood and he was well-known . . . He just was one to do crimes all the time even if we didn't use drugs at the time . . . And I got fascinated by that fast . . . kind of lifestyle. And I used to run away from home . . . and go stay with him . . . And then, finally, at the age of 16 I . . . left home.

Furthermore, in the gang, Chicanas could demonstrate that they, like the men, were courageous and trustworthy, that they too were leaders.

Paula: I knew that my family loved me, you know, but I . . . didn't like anybody telling me what to do . . . And I . . . liked being on the streets and I knew how to survive the street . . . And the respect, you know, it wasn't handed to me, I earned it . . . by . . . showing that I wasn't no punk . . . that I can go do what you want me to do . . . And I wasn't a follower because a lot of things that . . . we did . . . I would come up with the idea . . . And I had respect from my own age group, you know, along with my brother Tony . . . And then I started criming with them.

For Chicanas who had been victims of repeated sexual and physical abuse while growing up, gang-banging, or fighting with rival gangs, was a means of getting attention, acceptance, and respect as well as releasing their pent-up anger.

Luisa: It was very attracting to me . . . And I wanted to be so much accepted. I . . . wanted to be known. Being that I went through so much when I was a little kid, you know, being a victim at a very young age . . . all I wanted was attention and I got it in the wrong way. So . . . growing up I . . . did a lot of . . . very negative . . . stuff, by beating people . . . upside the head, just jumping women. And I loved it. I got the credit . . . I got praised.

Nonetheless, while many Chicanas felt safer in their gangs than in their homes or school, the violence associated with some of the gangs' activities (Jankowski 1991) frequently exacerbated the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder Chicanas lived with as the result of earlier abuse.[5]

Not all Chicanas who joined gangs came from gang-affiliated families. In fact, none of those interviewed said their parents were gang-affiliated, though other family members and even some of their children were. Luisa commented on the difference between herself and her sisters.

They were totally different . . . They're from Mexico. They married their husbands and being with their husbands from day one to this day . . . And not me . . . I was the only fuck-up. Me and my little sister, but she changed at the age of 16. I continued for about another 17 years.

Relationships Chicanas built with their peers in gangs were sometimes much closer than those with siblings.

Luisa: We used to all sit in crowds . . . you know, music, partying, dancing, crying. You know, some people would be getting tattoos. It was . . . scandalous . . . *la vida loca.* I loved it. At that time, they'd back me up. "That's my homegirl. Don't be talking about my homegirl." We'd share each other's clothes. We put each other's makeup on . . . And we'd get busted and go to jail together . . . That to me, that was like more like a sister than the sisters I had.

Frequently, however, siblings were part of a Chicana's homie network.

Carmen: I was raised in gangs . . . When I was at placements that's all it was, ex-gang members in placement . . . I met them through the system . . . basically. They were . . . from . . . my hometown . . . All my brothers and sisters were [also] gang members . . . So when I got out of Youth Authority I went back to where I knew was my family . . . And . . . we kind of stuck together and that was *la familia.* We went . . . through a lot of hard times together.

While many of those who have written about Chicana/o gangs emphasize how gang involvement leads to criminal activity and imprisonment, several pintas pointed out that the overwhelming number of gang members were not, in fact, incarcerated.

Yolanda: It was like only like a third of us went to prison and the rest . . . , you know, life has . . . been good to them, you know . . . Some of them got good

backgrounds, different families. I mean, . . . their life is better than mine, you know, the way I was brought up, you know.

Most who write about Chicana/o gangs emphasize how gang members came from broken homes, but Yolanda argued that was not always the case.

Some of them just did it to do it, just like I did it. You know, some of them had good families, you know. They just wanted to be out there.

The fact that gangs were multigenerational, including *veteranas/os,* or old-timers, who were the siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and sometimes grandparents of gang members, gave members a sense of continuity. It also illustrated how the gang had formed part of the history of the barrio and had sought to protect it from outsiders throughout the years (Jankowski 1991).

Luisa: We would . . . be partying with the ones that were veteranos already, like 45, 50 years old, from Florence. So . . . we're following that generation. Now . . . I'm grown and my daughter went through the same experience I did and got loaded in the same spot where I got loaded.

Gang Activities

Many of the legal and illegal activities associated with Chicana gang members were pursued by non-Chicana/o teenagers as well, gang members or not.

Luisa: And we used to just dance and make out, you know. Meet somebody and maybe going in . . . somebody's car and have sex. It was crazy! (laughs) . . . Dancing, messing around, crying a lot when I was loaded. I would reminisce about . . . home.

Sonia: I was from a gang called Hoyo Maravilla, you know . . . And there we drank, we partied, took pills, smoked weed, and eventually got introduced to heroin, you know.

Stealing cars was an activity Paula and some of her homeboys did together.

Paula: We'd go to just [steal] cars parked on the side of the street, you know, . . . parking lots . . . We'd use them to go crime 'cause none of us had cars . . . I used to steal my mother's car . . . But we would use it just to crime, ride around, you know, get us from one place to the next . . . and then, we'd let it go.

Some gang members also committed robberies together. Paula and her homies targeted well-off Chicana/o, but primarily white, neighborhoods.

I would just pick any neighborhood . . . It was all white people and some of the better areas . . . where white people that have money . . . and some upper-class Chicanos, you know, some that were well-off . . . We'd hang out at the park and . . . like . . . when I'd go criming, you know, like . . . stealing their purses or their wallets, . . . if they wouldn't give it up right away, . . . then I would hold the point of the gun in my hand, which would be that back end sticking out, . . . and I would just hit 'em with it and keep hitting them until they would give it up . . . And if I didn't have my gun on me or if . . . I had a partner with me doing the crime . . . then I would just sock them with my fist . . . until they would give it up . . . And then I would take off running . . . I never hit no Chicanos . . . They were all white.

Sometimes, through targeting white neighborhoods, Chicanas/os sought to retaliate for the discriminatory treatment they received from whites.

Paula: It's got a lot to do with . . . the white people and the way they . . . treat you . . . Back in my day there was a lot of prejudice . . . And I feel this is where they [Chicanos] get a lot of their . . . control or they feel they have a lot of power . . . Like . . . to get into maybe certain places . . . because . . . the white man will fear 'em, you know.

Cities like Los Angeles, from which almost half of the 24 pintas interviewed came, contained within them many barrios. The barrio or territory claimed by a gang could cover a few blocks or a few miles. Gangs were "generally named after the street, housing project, or barrio from which the gang" originated (Harris 1988: 95). Once a barrio's borders were delineated by gang members, fights ensued when gangs tried to encroach upon each other's territory.

A large part of gang activity during the 1970s and 1980s involved gang-banging, that is, fighting. Such fights were a way of both "protecting" their barrios and releasing the accumulated anger many Chicana/o youths felt when confronted with limited economic opportunities and/or neglect and abuse inside and outside the home. The latter included police harassment, brutality, arrest, and incarceration (Mirande 1987; Torres 1979).

Which rival gangs were targeted for gang-banging generally depended

upon which neighborhoods bordered Chicana/o barrios. Chicanas discussed what gang-banging entailed.

Graciela: We used to go to different neighborhoods just to fight with the other . . . people. We used to go drive to the different neighborhoods and yell out our neighborhood. And we used to . . . jump off the car if we see somebody, and we'd fight 'em. Came back to our neighborhood and somebody from out of town was here we used to fight with them, make 'em leave . . . Just to let them know that we were for our own neighborhood . . . Back then it was just [with] your hands.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Linda's gang in Flats fought primarily with other Chicanas/os.

I've been in physical fights . . . among Chicano . . . Sometimes it was just go somewhere and start a fight. But it was against Mexicans because that's all there was around here . . . Well, if they came down to where we hung around, yeah, we'd fight the whites. But they didn't come . . . And we had . . . some Blacks at Eliso Village . . . There was only one time that they fought that I can remember . . . The Blacks didn't come over here. The Chicanos didn't go to South Central. So basically everybody stood in their own territory . . . We knew not to travel out of your territory because that was trouble.

Paula, on the other hand, remembers how her gang, the Santos, fought rival white gangs.

We would go like away from our barrio and we'd go into places that we shouldn't of been . . . and we would just make trouble. You know, break windows in buildings and . . . just fight with the . . . white people . . . And back in . . . those days when I was real young . . . they didn't have guns . . . Some carried knives but it wasn't even . . . where they would use it, you know. It was all about boxing.

Cristina discussed what Chicana/o gangs fought about during the 1990s.

Drugs is one of 'em. Or sometimes one might get jealous 'cause one makes more money than the other . . . Gang territory. It's just, "I'm from Wilmas, you're from Pedro. I'm better than you." Which is stupid because they . . . don't even own it. It's not like they bought it, you know. You just rent a house somewhere . . . It's just like if their family couldn't afford living in Pedro they'd move to Wilmington. And then . . . if . . . I'm from Pedro and that person's from Wilmington they're gonna fight . . . And nobody owns this land . . . Whoever got in a fight on the streets

we took it from there. Like if I got jumped . . . we going back to . . . get whoever we get. And then they'll retaliate back and it's just a volleyball.

Fights between gangs most frequently took place in isolated areas not easily spotted by police officers.

Paula: They would fight in the park . . . But . . . I'd say 98 percent of the time . . . the fights would take place in the alley.

As the years passed, Chicana/o gangs throughout California underwent other significant changes. Paula described the changes that took place in the Santos gang as its members became more immersed in heroin use, other illegal activities, and violence.

Well, as the . . . years went on . . . we started carrying guns and . . . pistol whipping . . . a lot of our victims. Then everybody was using heroin . . . It just wasn't me anymore . . . And, you know, stealing cars and breaking into houses . . . and . . . fighting with the West Side, you know, . . . the Diablos . . . That's another gang that . . . formed . . . You know, that was the West Side and we were the South Side . . . It was all a big . . . control . . . thing . . . Who's to get the customer . . . and . . . what side had better dope, and fighting for their turf . . . I've seen a lot of people killed . . . It still has to do with . . . power . . . And they're not united. They were more united. It . . . was two different turfs and two different *gangas* but . . . there was a little bit more respect . . . Now it's just like totally out of control, you know . . . They can't come to terms about nothing.

Pintas interviewed agreed that until the 1970s, gang fights did not generally involve guns, though they could involve fists, chains, bats, and knives (Moore 1991; Moore, Vigil, and Levy 1995). While some male gang members did carry guns "'cause that was the man thing to do," (Linda), they fought with their fists for the same reason. During the 1970s and into the early 1980s, gang violence escalated as guns were introduced into gang warfare and drive-by shootings became common (Moore 1991). While the violence waned during much of the 1980s, by the end of the 1980s it had begun to rise again. Chicana gang members participated in the violence, although to a lesser extent than Chicanos.

Deborah: The gangs I think have changed quite a bit from when we grew up, from the '60s, '70s . . . Back then . . . gang members didn't fight with guns . . . It was

like with your fist. You know, it was like straight toe-to-toe fighting . . . Get a bat, whatever . . . The worst weapon we might of had was a knife . . . But generally, it was the guys that were using those. The women you might have heard way back when they had razors up here in their hairpieces . . . It's none of this cowardly stuff that we got today. It's easy to pick up a gun and shoot somebody that's going down the street that doesn't even know you got a gun pointing at 'em!

Graciela: Like I said, in nowadays they all carry guns and there's no more fighting. They just shoot now. You can't even walk down the street. I remember when I was living on Wilmington Boulevard and D Street, every night a group from out of town would come in and shoot right there on Wilmington Boulevard. All the sudden, at a certain time of night, you just hear shooting. And Wilmington started firing back . . . It was like a war going on and just bullets flying everywhere . . . Yes, there's a few women in there.

Paula commented on how in her gang the focus of gang-banging switched from whites to other Chicana/o gangs.

Back in those days when I was young . . . we never hurt our own Raza . . . There seemed to be more . . . understanding, you know. "You stay on your side. We stay on our side . . . You don't do nothing . . . to try to take over . . . like our customers or the women," you know . . . It was all about respect . . . Every once in a while . . . that would be broken . . . and then they would . . . box . . . There was more . . . peace . . . even though it was two separate *gangas* . . . I'd say about the . . . early 70s, that's when it started getting ugly . . . It's not even focused on white people like it was back then . . . You still have it but as not as much as it used to be . . . Once they started going at each other and really killing each other off . . . the white people just phased out. I mean, . . . they weren't the targets anymore.

In a few cases, Chicana/o gangs have been able to put aside their differences and sign peace treaties or truces. The treaties, which became more prominent during the 1990s, were generally made by male gang members, although some current and former Chicana gang members were involved.

Cristina: There's a truce now. Before the truce we fought big-time. Wilmington was against Harbor City, Pedro, Carson, and Long Beach. We're the middle so we gotta be the strongest. You got all these other cities around us like a circle. So, anywhere we go, we're in another neighborhood. It's not like we can go to the store and it's in our neighborhood. We'd have to go to Pedro if we wanted

something, to the show or whatever. And so, yeah, we're fighting big-time. Then they started the truces.

Values, Codes, and Rituals

Another salient feature of gangs were the values, codes, and rituals associated with them. These regulated members' relationships with one another as well as with non–gang members. They helped develop a collective identity that insured the group's continued survival (Jankowski 1991). For Chicanas/os who experienced disconnection from their families and public and private institutions such as schools and churches, gangs provided a sense of continuity and stability. Gang codes included trustworthiness, honesty, courage, loyalty to one's homies and the barrio, honoring the veteranas/os, and no snitching, that is, informing.

Along with the codes were the rituals of being "jumped in" the gang and adopting a style of dress and speech that differentiated cholas/os from other Chicanas/os. Tattoos became the trademark of individual gang members who generally had the names of their barrios or partners marked on their skin. *Placas,* or graffiti, were most often the trademark of a barrio. "Hand signs for the letters of the gang's initials were used as a greeting among members of the same gang and as a way to diss a rival gang" (Christensen 1999: 76). While nicknames were also clever and important ways of identifying and describing individual gang members, they were not included here because they make those interviewed too easily identifiable.

Being jumped into the gang reflected that gang members had come to trust Chicanas who, through their previous participation in various gang activities, had already demonstrated their loyalty to the gang and the barrio. Being jumped in was, thus, a formality.

Luisa: You kind of run around with them. Go to school with them. You get in trouble. You get suspended . . . You go to ditching parties. You drink. You know, you smoke your little pot. You do your little transactions together and they see that you're down . . . to getting in trouble and getting into shit. And then they just say, "You know, if you want to get in the barrio we're going to have to kick your ass." So I said, *¿Dónde?* . . . So that's how I got in. That's the way they do it when you get . . . initiated . . . into a neighborhood.

Luisa: I got my ass kicked from about three older women . . . They were very popular women in the barrio . . . One of them was . . . like . . . 15 years older than

me . . . These are the women that initiated me to the neighborhood . . . I was in a room and they cornered me in . . . They told me not to, but I was fighting back. Shit, they were pounding my head and beating the shit out of me . . . Got my ass kicked and then I was proud 'cause I was involved.

Being jumped into the gang was also a way to prove how much one could take if attacked by others. Once jumped in Chicanas became members.

Luisa: Automatically. Like putting the straw on a soda and drink out of it.

Once identified as being from a certain barrio, the label of homegirl/boy was jealously guarded by Chicanas/os.

Luisa: See . . . you have to be very careful of who you call homegirl because people are very, "What do you mean you're my homegirl? You ain't from my hood!"

Not all Chicanas/os had to get jumped into the gang to be members. Some were considered part of the gang because they had been born in that barrio or because their siblings were already respected gang members.

Luisa: You don't have to get cornered in. You can hang around. You could be a . . . sympathizer. But you don't have to get your ass kicked in it. And I did, like a dummy. But at the time it was fun.

Paula: I was welcome wherever I went . . . I didn't have to prove myself, you know . . . It had a lot to do with my . . . brother's popularity . . . You know, "That's Tony's sister . . ." At that time they called us the Santos. That was over there on the South Side of Escondido.

Linda: I didn't have an initiation. I just walked into it . . . Don't forget my brothers . . . And we were all born down there . . . Flats . . . People didn't get beat up to belong to the gang.

For many Chicanas, being part of a gang involved bragging about membership and being a visible gang member. Adopting the chola image fulfilled these functions and allowed Chicanas to simultaneously show off their femininity and their toughness. Not all Chicanas, however, adopted the dress and lingo (Galindo 1993) associated with gang members. Some, in fact, dressed quite tomboyishly (Miranda 2003).

Deborah: I wore T-shirts and Levis and tennis shoes . . . That was my wardrobe up until probably, till I . . . started holding a . . . decent job in recovery . . . It's like

there's some gang members that will go out there and they are very visible . . . But I couldn't afford the . . . clothes, you know, . . . Everybody . . . talks about, you know, "I'm from so-and-so." I never really got into that.

One of the most important gang codes was "no snitching." Thus, even when Luisa was cut by a rival gang member during a fight, she refused to talk to the police about the incident.

Luisa: And then, when the cops came that night they asked me who had done it and I says, "I don't know. It was just a crowd of people that just jumped me." And the two females were right there . . . one from Mexico . . . and one Chicana . . . I guess they thought I was going to tell on them, but I never told.

The all-important code of no snitching eventually followed pintas into jails (see Chapter 14) and prisons.

Another gang code was respecting the veteranas/os, who, because of their age, willingness to fight for their barrio throughout the years, and ability to survive inside the barrio and/or in penal institutions, had earned respect. Veteranas/os helped keep track of the gang's history.

Cristina: She's older than me. I give her the respect 'cause she's been around and back . . . She's lived that life . . . She knows the . . . good points and bad points of being there . . . They earn the . . . respect. Because if you're a gang member you know . . . a lot [about] life, in general, giving birth, watching them disappear from you . . . Like, for my age I've seen too many of them die in front of me, you know.

Respecting their elders and valuing the veteranas/os was one of the ways Chicana/o gang members maintained a sense of continuity with traditional Chicana/o family values that emphasized respect for elders. For gang members, veteranas/os were part of the extended family system that both the gang and the barrio represented.

Gender and Sexuality

While Chicana gang members have generally been portrayed as playing merely supportive roles to male members, Chicanas assumed a variety of roles depending on their personalities and the gang they belonged to. Moreover, women's cliques of mixed gangs often enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy from male cliques (Moore 1991, 1994). According to Rita, Chicanas played three main roles in mixed gangs: sexual partners, friends, and fighting partners.

Fighting partners, buddies. Either they're being with each other or they just hung out. Everybody just hung out and partied, got high.

Graciela, a member of one of Wilmington's West Side gangs, saw the relationship between male and female gang members as one of camaraderie but not always free of tensions. While some of the tensions were caused by Chicanas dating boys from other gangs, at times it was the opposite (Vigil 1988).

Just friends, homegirl, homeboy . . . They'd get mad at us sometimes 'cause we messed up their play with their blonde girlfriends they used to bring in from out of town. We used to chase them out. But other than that they respected us. They were there for us if we needed them . . . If they asked us to do something, if we couldn't do it, we couldn't do it. But most of the time that they asked us to do something we'd do it for 'em.

A common observation is that women gang members are frequently considered the property of the men (Brotherton and Barrios 2004; Jankowski 1991; Moore 1991). A second assumption is that to be accepted in a mixed gang Chicanas must have sex with multiple male partners. None of the pintas interviewed claimed to have been pressured to have sex with male gang members. However, they spoke of Chicanas who they considered to be quite promiscuous (see Harris 1988).

Deborah: In Los Angeles County, there's a lot of gangs and there's a lot of women . . . There are a lot of girls that . . . I would see would sleep with a whole bunch of different guys.

While some Chicanas opted to play a secondary role vis-à-vis male gang members, others, like Paula, preferred to crime with homeboys in the gang.

I ran with nothing but my homeboys . . . They were all boys except for maybe . . . five girls . . . There was a lot of . . . males. There must have been about . . . 15 . . . Now there's more women, you know, that . . . are claiming Santos . . . But back then . . . women were about a handful, and it remained like that for years . . . On the West Side they didn't have any females . . . in the . . . other gang that they formed, the Diablos. They do now.

Sometimes there was at least one identifiable lesbian in a gang. However, they were seen as the exceptions rather than the rule and accepted "in spite of" the fact that they were lesbians (see Miranda 2003).[6]

Luisa: One of the ones that cornered me . . . she was a . . . butch. A lot of women were scared of her because she was like real aggressive and she was older . . . She used to threaten them . . . Those homeboys, they really never did nothing because this family was real big . . . so a lot of people respected them . . . I don't even think they knew she was a lesbian but we knew, me and the girls.

Paula: Just the way that they would talk . . . about gay people . . . I don't think they would of accepted 'em . . . You know . . . how it was a disgrace . . . to your Raza . . . But it was different with me . . . because I was . . . raised with these people . . . In fact, they knew before my parents did . . . because . . . I was afraid to tell my family and I was afraid to tell my brothers. So . . . I confided in . . . some of the homeboys . . . And it didn't make a difference . . . that I was gay, you know. I never flaunted in their face . . . but they knew . . . And it was strange, there just wasn't any . . . gay people in my barrio. I was the only one that I know of.

With the advent of the lesbian and gay civil rights movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s, more Chicanas became willing to come out to their peers in the gangs, and at least one group of lesbians in California had formed their own gang.

Deborah: I know a lot of women that are . . . gays and I have a daughter that's [gay] . . . When I was growing up . . . people didn't come out with that way back then as they do today . . . Patricia had a sister that was stone . . . stud . . . and she was from . . . Florence . . . She was accepted . . . I know that there are gangs that are gay . . . I have run into women that do have this group . . . I think you find . . . those groups now more so because everybody's . . . just out of the closet . . . They were not openly like that . . . at that time . . . In jail they are, and when they're out here they're not.

While in some gangs open lesbians were accepted by their peers, some female gangs tried to protect themselves from being labeled lesbians by both prohibiting lesbians from joining their gangs and monitoring closely "inappropriate love" between members (Miranda 2003: 98). Notwithstanding such public declarations, however, Victoria pointed out that some publicly heterosexual-identified homegirls did engage in sexual interchanges with one another both in the barrio and while they were incarcerated together (see Chapter 15).

While most pintas interviewed enjoyed being in mixed gangs, some enjoyed the freedom of hanging out only with the homegirls.

Graciela: There was a boys' and girls' gang, but I hung around nothing but girls. We were all from the West Side around Morehall Park.

Pintas described some of the illegal activities women in gangs did together.

Yolanda: I did a lot of stupid things with a bunch of other girls . . . A lot of tagging . . . spray painting . . . A lot of . . . theft-related things, car stealing . . . I mean, I would beat up people just because I didn't like the way they looked or the way they talked or for a lot of stupid reasons.

Luisa: I kicked a whole lot of ass . . . And I must have cut maybe four or five people. Then the last time it backfired on me. The knife, it bent on me and . . . a girl that must have weighed like 250 pounds sat on me while the other one was slicing me . . . I must have been like maybe 20 at the time, 21 . . . And I remember my daughter . . . like four years old . . . waking up and . . . saying, "My mommy, my mommy, don't cut my mommy. My mommy is bleeding! Oh, my God!"

Cristina was part of a larger West Side gang in Wilmington that broke down into smaller cliques, including, among others, the Tic Toc Locas and the Tic Toc Locos.

There was Tic Toc Locas . . . Tic Toc Locos . . . It was a corner store and it was called Tic Toc. . . . Everyone kicked back at Tic Toc . . . My sister and them had club jackets . . . A lot of them got their tattoos of 'em . . . We'd have meetings on my mom's block. The girls would be kicking in one corner and the guys in the other.

Cristina described what women gang members discussed.

Boys, the girls that we couldn't stand. "Oh, so-and-so had a baby. She dropped out of school." Or "So-and-so got beat up by so-and-so." Or "Armando got a brand new car." Or "Delimar's getting married." And "Oh, did you know so-and-so went to jail?" It was basically that.

While pintas interviewed generally described their relationships with homegirls as being positive, Linda, who preferred the company of homeboys, described how she used other Chicanas.

I would use women . . . I would use them to go to places that I wanted to go because maybe something interesting like a connection was there and I didn't want to go by myself. Then I would hook up with the women and we'd both go together.

Linda added that distrust among homegirls was based on their competing for men who have access to drugs.

Yeah, there were a lot of us . . . There was no trust among us. We just didn't trust each other . . . because of the dope . . . So there was no way we could have been friends . . . I didn't trust them [Chicanos] either, but they had something I wanted.

Pintas commented on some of the changes that have taken place since the 1980s with respect to the types of activities performed by Chicana gang members and the expectations placed on them by male gang members and male partners. With the passage of California's Three Strikes Law, Chicanos increasingly sought to avoid further arrests that could lead to lengthy mandatory sentence terms. Thus, some Chicanos became more willing to let women deal drugs.

Deborah: I think that they let the women take on these roles . . . as far as the drug dealings because . . . they're not as easy on time anymore. You know, California has really been impacted by . . . the Three Strikes thing.

Additionally, as more and more Chicanos were sent to prison for drug-related crimes, more Chicanas were forced by economic circumstances and their own drug addictions to engage in illegal activities previously performed by the men in their lives.

Paula: Well, the women, when their old man would get busted . . . they stay in the gang and they continue doing whatever it was that they were doing, . . . crime, you know, whatever . . . to support their . . . own habit.

Moreover, some Chicanas took over drug businesses previously controlled by their male partners (Moore and Mata 1981).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Chicanas became even more willing to form both women's subsidiaries in mixed gangs and independent women's gangs (Miranda 2003). Some of these were also more likely than in the past to deal in drugs.

Paula: Now . . . women got their own little gangs . . . and . . . they'd be going out for the same thing the men are, you know, and that's the big old power trip, you know, control. Who can sell more drugs. Who had better drugs. Weapons, now, you know.

Chicanas like Deborah who were active in gangs during the 1960s and 1970s also saw changes take place in the ages at which Chicanas started participating in gangs.

I think there's much more expected of the women than there were way back then. These women today, they're getting involved in gang activity at the age of 11, you know, 10 years old. You wouldn't hear of that back in the '70s or the '60s . . . Those are children.

Despite the increasing willingness of Chicanas to participate in illegal gang activities generally associated with men, female gangs and subsidiaries continued to make up a small number of the existing gangs. Likewise, Chicanos continued to dominate the largest aspects of such business. This was most evident in the barriers to women's membership in the Mexican Mafia.

The Mexican Mafia, EME

Linda joined the Flats gang during the mid-1950s while growing up in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles. One of the most significant aspects of Flats was that some of its members were also members of EME. Some Chicanas became involved with the organization through male relatives.

Linda: As a teenager, I was involved with a gang here on . . . Boyle Heights . . . They used to call them Flats . . . And I used to do a lot of association . . . with some of them and they were in the Mexican Mafia . . . Brothers and nephews . . . because they've gone through the prison system . . . so that's how the associations comes around.

Despite her association with EME members, Linda said her involvement with them was about using drugs and not trafficking.

Paula's gang-related activities did not end with her barrio youth gang. Eventually, she hooked up with EME-affiliated homeboys and began trafficking drugs across the U.S.-Mexican border with them.

Originally how we all started out was from the border brothers that were bringing it across . . . the border right here . . . in Tijuana . . . you know, that were here illegally . . . They would bring it with them . . . And then once you get in good with them then they . . . tip you off on who you can go to across the border, and you just make the *mero*[7] over there . . . Back then . . . you could . . . cross the border, go do your thing, and bring it right across, you know, no problem . . . You didn't have that back then where people are snitching you off . . . You had a few here and there . . . But now . . . they'd just buy everybody off and they know everything because everybody is being tipped off . . . They know when, where, who . . . And . . . they got dogs and . . . if you even look suspicious . . . they searching you.

While only men were allowed to join EME, a few women such as Paula were allowed to participate in EME-related enterprises, primarily transporting drugs across the Mexican-U.S. border. Asked if Chicanas were allowed to have guns, steal, and/or kill other people, Paula answered, "Yes."

According to Paula, Chicanas ran with EME-affiliated men for the same reason Chicanos did: "They just have more power." Paula described how she became involved in EME-related activities alongside some of her homeboys. She illustrated the acceptable level of involvement for Chicanas and what was expected of both women and men.

I started running around with homeboys that were affiliated . . . It's all male . . . Women can't join . . . But when you run with 'em . . . they let you in a little bit here and there, you know, certain places, things, people . . . Certain places you couldn't go into . . . Certain people you couldn't meet . . . You have to be able to not rat, just go down, you know, even if you . . . only participated so much and the rest is on the other person . . . You have to be real strong. You have to be able to do what they do.

The seriousness of being involved with EME was demonstrated by the scale of the drugs, money, and weapons involved.

Paula: From what I've seen, the involvement I've had, . . . it's a lot of drugs, a lot of big people, big money, artillery . . . They used to have grenades, AK-47s, 9-millimeters, bullet-proof vests.

Despite the different scale of involvement in drug enterprises, some of the goals of barrio gangs and EME were the same: to achieve power, control, respect, and greater independence from mainstream economic activities. The money earned from large-scale drug trafficking allowed EME-affiliated Chicanas/os to have a greater freedom of movement and enjoy a higher standard of living.

Paula: Power, money, just living real, real proper . . . Just being able to buy what you wanna buy whenever . . . you see it . . . Yeah, being able to get up and go where you wanna go. If you feel like going to Disneyland or on vacation somewhere in Méjico . . . Things that we can't normally do . . . because we don't have . . . the funds.

Though Paula had earned a substantial amount of money as a result of her involvement with EME, she spent all the proceeds on her addiction.

I used it all on . . . drugs. Every bit of it went on drugs, you know.

Likewise, none of the pintas who had access to diverse sources of income generated by illegal activities were ultimately able to accumulate enough income to support themselves, their families, and/or their drug habits for long periods of time.

Leaving the Gang

While for most Chicanas being in a gang was something they did while they were in their teens and early twenties, for others it became a permanent way of life.

Deborah: I think it's just a thing that we do when we're young . . . There's some people that never mature and stay in that madness. They . . . grow up and turn their houses into party houses. I know a woman like that, 50 years old! You know, ¡Viva la Raza! and still holds it down for the neighborhood and lets . . . all these youngsters party in her home . . . There's a lot of people still out there in the barrio that do that.

Some pintas felt it was easy for members to leave the gang. Others claimed membership was for life and those trying to get out were penalized (Harris 1988).

Sonia: They jump you into the gang . . . And the same way if you want to get out of that gang you get jumped . . . out, you know.

Luisa: Because if you get in by getting your ass kicked you stay in. You can't get out. That's just . . . a code.

Pintas noted that there were many motivations for Chicanas to leave the gang.

Cristina: I was having kids at 16 and everybody's out there gang-banging. I was doing that when I was 13. By the time I was 15 I was having my kids. So by the time my kids were old enough and I was like 23 then that's when I started to go back out. And, at that age, everybody else is having their kids . . . I was in the same gang all the way through. I just got to a point where I said, "No, no more." I had to think of my kids. I guess everything changes. I mean, from me going back and forth to jail and then I'm seeing my brothers back and forth, and they're all getting prison time and now my sister-in-law is getting prison time . . . I can't afford prison time . . . My boyfriend I have now did eight years. His mom and dad died . . . while he was in there. What if my dad dies and my brother's away? And that's my heart, you know, I can't afford that.

Deborah: A lot of these women are either dead, or married, have kids, or [are] church people now. I mean, I'm 41 years old. Florencia's in prison . . . Iliana is out there. She's still abusing. Marcela . . . is infected . . . You know, AIDS has . . . infected many of the people that I know.

Paula: The thing with it now is that . . . we're all old now, you know . . . We're all pushing 50 . . . A lot of 'em turned their life around . . . Some of 'em are married and have families . . . Some of them are with Victory Outreach Church . . . They're Christian now . . . But most of my friends, you know, they're dead. They either got killed or they killed themselves or they're doing life in prison . . . And it just . . . faded out. The name and the gang hasn't . . . The new generation has it . . . but they're old-timers . . . most of 'em are dead . . . It's just something of our past . . . that we were all once in.

When Paula was released on parole in 1996, she did not resume her gang involvement for a number of reasons.

I didn't leave it . . . but I'm not . . . claiming it no more . . . Well, . . . now that I'm in recovery I'm not in it. But it wasn't up until a . . . little over a year ago . . . How did recovery make a difference? Because it's something that I couldn't be a part of anymore. You know, because it's still gots to do with drugs, criming, and I don't wanna be there anymore.

Parole conditions also kept Paula from resuming her relationship with her former associates on the streets. Ironically, EME's policy that women cannot join the gang made it easier for Paula to break her ties to it.

Paula: Because you're not . . . actually committed to them, you know . . . It's not to say like for a male that actually joins . . . And there is no way for a male . . . that . . . you can ever leave, it's just something that you . . . either die or you grow old, you know.

Despite strong ties Chicanas had with their barrios and their gangs, once pintas became addicted to heroin, such ties were severely disrupted or severed though they continued to associate with some of their homies (Harris 1988; Moore and Mata 1981). Out of necessity they became more likely to venture into other Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o neighborhoods to buy drugs and develop new drug-related associations.

Deborah: When I started using heroin . . . there were no boundaries for me . . . You didn't have to be from Florence for me to use. You could be from Maravilla.

You could of been from The Avenue. You could be a wino in the street. I'll use with you if you had it . . . It was like, you know, wherever the drugs are at, that's where you belong.

Sonia: You get involved in drugs and then it's not about the . . . neighborhood. Because when you get involved in drugs you . . . go everywhere to score. So you don't really hang with the neighborhood no more . . . Once I became a heroin addict it . . . wasn't all about the gang, it was all about the money that I can make to support my habit . . . Eventually your . . . mentality changes 'cause all you're thinking about is . . . not the gang so much, although you claim that neighborhood, but you're not there, because you're going different places to do crimes. You move to different areas . . . away from the cops so they won't know you. So you don't . . . think of the gang that much until you're busted and you go to prison and you start telling people where you're from, you know. Or . . . you hang around with the homegirls that are in prison.

Asked if they had to face any retaliation for leaving the gang, several Chicanas responded that they had not.

Cristina: As far as a lot of 'em, they still see me in it. It's not like I faded away. To them, "Yeah, you still . . . from the West Side. You'll always be from the West Side." But they know I'm trying to get away from it. They know, "I don't want my kids involved. So don't tell my kids about it." . . . I throw it back to them at another way, "Would you want your kids killed? . . . Okay, well, I don't want mine either. That's why I do what I do." And they just leave me alone.

Deborah: I know a lot of the people still but . . . I've matured . . . And a lot of the people that I grew up with and . . . partied with . . . are very happy for me.

The fact that one stopped being an active gang member, however, did not mean that Chicanas shunned their barrios or their former associates. It meant that they stopped engaging in gang activities.

Deborah: I would say that, you know . . . you could take the girl out of the neighborhood but you can't take the neighborhood out of her . . . I will never forget where I came from. I will never forget my life. I live in Pasadena. I have a nice little house, but I will never forget my people over there. And anything that I can ever do for them I will do, in the sense that it's good for them and not harmful to me . . . And I will help anybody that wants to get off the street and . . . find a better life for themselves . . . And they know this . . . I'm not involved in any illegal activity . . . I live it through a straight and narrow arrow here . . . I don't associate myself in that way any more. I'm just a married recovery person now.