

# HUMAN TARGETS

Schools, Police, and  
the Criminalization  
of Latino Youth

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*Foreword by James Diego Vigil*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

# Crossing Institutional Settings

The foul-tasting latex flavor of the blueberry-sized, heroin-filled balloons tucked inside my bottom lip forced me to compulsively spit, leaving a trail of saliva splotches on the sidewalk to evaporate in the hot California sun. After my homeboy and business partner, Conejo, and I shared a forty-ounce bottle of Olde English malt liquor, I had saved the bottle to fill with water from any functioning outdoor faucet I could find in this precarious corner of East Oakland—Twenty-Seventh Avenue and Foothill Boulevard. Sometimes, I added a packet of bright-red, cherry Kool-Aid to give the water some flavor.

Fifteen years old and desperate for money in 1993, I teamed up with Conejo to find a new venture. Conejo was in his early twenties and had sold heroin here in the past. Feeling left out of the education process, I had dropped out of school. We each invested twenty-five dollars to purchase a caramel-chew-sized chunk of heroin, which we broke into ten smaller pieces to sell for ten dollars each. We sealed each piece in small water balloons to hide inside our mouths; if the police stopped and frisked us, we could swallow the balloons. Later, we figured, we could dig through our excrement and recover the goods. This was risky business, and we knew it: Two of our homies had been hospitalized from ingesting heroine that had leaked into their intestines after they had swallowed their balloons. But for Conejo and me, selling heroin was both a desperate way to earn some money and bold proof of our manhood on the streets—we were self-sufficient and could handle danger. Through our industrious entre-

preneurship, we could gain self-worth, belonging, dignity, pride, and cash—the very resources that social institutions made unattainable for poor youth like us. Conejo and I thought we had found a way to make something out of nothing, to persist, to survive—or in the words of our elders who had taught us about survival and hard work, *buscando vida*—loosely translated, “in search of livelihood.” This hard-work ethic had entered the informal economy with us.

The next step was to test the product. We couldn’t risk retaliation for poisoning someone with a bad batch. A few local *tecatos*—heroin addicts—were more than willing to offer their services: free heroin testing in exchange for free product. With few words between us besides a *q-vo*, “what’s up,” Topo, one of the addicts, gestured with his head in the direction of Sausal Creek, and we followed him half a block away to the dry creek bed. With an index finger, I scooped one of the balloons from inside my bottom lip, wiped it dry on my black, extra-baggy Ben Davis work pants, and handed it to Topo. He ripped it open, pinched off a piece of the gooey, black tar heroin, and placed it on a tarnished, stainless-steel spoon that he pulled from his pocket. Topo asked for some of the bright-red Kool-Aid from my bottle. I looked at him with a puzzled face.

“It’ll give it good flavor, homie!” he muttered.<sup>1</sup>

I poured a bit of the drink in the bottle cap and transferred it into the spoon. With a lighter, Topo heated the spoon from the bottom, and the lump of heroin melted into a *caldito*, “little soup.” Carefully, Topo handed the spoon to Conejo to hold as he grabbed a syringe from his pocket and filled it with the *caldito*. He wrapped a red bandana around his arm, forcefully smacked his wrist with two fingers, and injected himself.

“Please don’t die. . . . I wanna make some money,” I thought to myself.

Less than a minute later, Topo turned to us from his squatted position, and flashed a big smile. In a languid tone, he whispered, “*Ta bueno*” (it’s good).

“Hell, yeah! We finna make some money!” I wanted to shout, but I slowly nodded, playing it cool.

Grinding heroin for two fourteen-hour days on street corners waiting for clients yielded a profit of fifty dollars. I had doubled my initial investment, but the glamour of drug-selling quickly turned into a scary reality. I couldn't shake the fear of getting caught, becoming addicted, or ending up in prison. The possibility of being victimized and perpetually stuck making low wages loomed large. I knew a handful of guys who made hundreds of dollars a day selling drugs, but the majority of us hit a "tar ceiling" at street-level dealing, with very little money trickling down our way. Fear of the short-term consequences—violence or arrest—was enough, and I was blind to the long-term impact of crime, consequences serious enough to impede my success in adulthood.

After three days of street peddling heroin, a twenty-something-year-old veteran drug dealer approached me as I leaned against a wall on the back side of the liquor store where Conejo, a half-dozen other guys, and I usually posted, waiting for customers. I was sipping from my bottle of Kool-Aid when he addressed me point-blank, "Why you perpetrating, mothafucka?" Before I could ask him what he was talking about, he smacked the bottle out of my hand, glass shattering against the wall, staining the dingy, khaki-colored paint red. "Get the fuck out of here! If I see you around here again, I'ma scrape your ass, mothafucka!"

"Man, fuck you! You know who I'm with?" I snarled.

He reached into his pants at his waistline and pulled out a gun, waving it around. "I don't give a fuck who you wit! If I see you around here again, you gonna get shot."

I walked away, looking for Conejo. This guy was cleaning up the area, Conejo cautioned, creating his own drug monopoly. "We could bring the homies and take the territory back . . . is it worth it to you? We making enough money to take the risk? To take this fool out?"

Ignoring Conejo's advice, I started a fight a few days later with the older drug dealer's nephew, a kid my age, to retaliate against his uncle's threats. I was walking with two of my friends when I told them, "Hold on!" and I started running toward the kid. I caught him off guard, from behind, in front of another liquor store a few blocks

away and began punching and kicking him. As he ran inside the store for refuge, I walked away, proud of my attack.

About thirty minutes later, I was celebrating, laughing and recounting the sequence of events, when a 1980s Honda Civic slowed down as it approached us on busy Foothill Boulevard. I turned to see the driver, a chubby-faced, goateed man about forty, look straight at us from behind dark sunglasses. Right below him, I spied the dark-steel and light-wood trim of a shotgun. Instinctually, I fell backward, flat on my ass. A loud shot rang out, followed by a splatter noise as the shotgun shell pelted the wooden steps with dozens of pellet-sized pockmarks less than a foot above my head.

Collapsed on the ground, but uninjured, I sat there alone, my heart pounding. My friends were gone: They had noticed the driver a few seconds ahead of me and managed to jump a nearby fence before the gunshot.

The close call shook me to the core.

At fifteen and no stranger to violence, I had dabbled in marijuana and heroin sales and had stolen bicycles or cars to sell parts for ready cash. None of these activities had produced consistent, lucrative money, and all were fraught with dangers and huge risks. I even had landed in juvenile hall, for felony offenses, and was on strict probationary terms. Mess up again, and I would face some serious time.

But what other choice did I have? I wondered, except to continue to take those risks and face those dangers. What about my dispute with the older drug dealer? Would I step up my game and stake a claim for that street corner? Would I do whatever was necessary to compete with rivals for the territorial rights to sell drugs? And what would happen if I went down that path?

By chance around this time, I found a small flier in my pants pocket that a teacher had given me three weeks ago, the last time I had set foot in school. "Need a Job? Talk to Ms. Miller in Room D211. Fridays at Lunch," the flyer read.

Desperate for cash, I returned to school to pay a visit to Ms. Miller and another teacher, Ms. Russ, who had mentored me in the past and had asked Ms. Miller to look out for me. Ms. Miller, who appeared

to like me, made dozens of phone calls to local businesses inquiring about jobs. Finally, German Auto Salvage, an auto repair shop, said they needed someone to clean up the shop four hours a day. It was this or a violent fight for the street corner. So, a few days later, I had a steady job cleaning up a repair shop, dismantling wrecked autos, and helping with oil changes and basic mechanic work. The six-dollar-an-hour wage was more consistent than the money I could earn through the illicit economy, and, even more important, German Auto Salvage taught me about professionalism, auto mechanics, and maintaining a steady job. I stayed at German Auto for over a year until I found a better paying job as an expeditor, later a bus-boy, and then a waiter at a local steak house called Charlie Brown's. These strong connections with mentors and the solid work opportunities they helped me obtain offered me a viable choice, and I never returned to the streets to steal or to sell drugs. In fact, for the next decade, I worked at least twenty hours a week, while continuing my education.

Despite drifting in and out of street life and hanging out with my homeboys for a few more years, I found I was able to exist in two worlds: fixing people's cars or serving food with courtesy and professionalism, on one hand, and engaging in turf disputes and putting myself at risk of arrest and victimization, on the other. By age seventeen, I had returned to school with a serious outlook and was shifting seamlessly between these various settings—school, probation, the street gang, the workplace—adopting a different persona for each. At school, I was the street kid turned legit; with my probation officer, I was the reformed criminal; on the street, I was that homie who had put in work, but now was less willing to break the law because of the greater risk of going to prison; at work, I was the fast-learning, hard-working kid eager for promotions who dreamed of going to college.

But without opportunities as a fifteen-year-old youth, flat on my ass amid a hail of shotgun fire, desperate for money and a place on the street, I could have easily remained like many of my peers—a human target. To be a human target is to be victimized and considered an enemy by others; it is to be viewed as a threat by law en-

forcement and schools and to be treated with stigma, disrepute, and punishment. Elsewhere, I have written that mass incarceration and punitive social control have constructed the treatment of a generation of marginalized youths as perennial criminals in need of control and containment, before they even commit their first offense; they encounter what I have termed “the youth control complex” (Rios 2011). Not all marginalized young people are as fortunate. In my professional career, as I have worked with young people who were labeled as deviant or criminal, I have found the dominant approach to reform these youngsters is to crack down on them, punish them until they follow directions, or harass and brutalize them to teach them a lesson. What allowed me to eventually turn conventional and escape being a perpetual target was not just an ability to code switch among my environments—something many urban youths learn on the streets—but also encountering tangible resources that caring adults facilitated for me: connections to meaningful educational, social, and labor market opportunities; the knowledge to recognize opportunity and take advantage of it; and the support to fortify my education-oriented aspirations, expectations, and day-to-day behaviors (see Vigil 1988).

In *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (2011), I wrote about how some young people in the inner city grow up policed and punitively controlled by schools, parents, law enforcement, and others. I demonstrated how punishment operates as a social fabric of everyday life for marginalized young men. These young people experienced a kind of social death; they were outcasts before they even committed their first offense. This kind of targeting creates a system that metes out brutal symbolic and physical force on young people. In essence, young people become targets for police, schools, and other systems of social control to aim punitive resources and treatment at. This study lays out the interactional dynamics that take place within these punitive contexts, within a culture obsessed with control.<sup>2</sup>

In this book, I offer an analysis of the quality of interactions between authority figures and youths and of how these interactions



impact the ways these youths engage with institutional actors; of how they view themselves, their social contexts, their futures; and of how they behave. I analyze how culture plays a key role in determining the well-being of young people that navigate punitive institutional settings. I show how, in attempting to support or reform youths placed at risk, schools and police develop practices that contradict good intentions.<sup>3</sup> These actions support a specific kind of cultural framing in young people that often leads them to further criminalization. In the end, I argue that institutional process and power overdetermine young people's ability to adopt and refine specific cultural practices and actions that impact their well-being. I also include recommendations for program and policy solutions to the misunderstanding, misjudging, and mistreatment leveled on these youths that perpetuate their social misery.

Although the problem of hypercriminalization, targeting, and negative framing of marginalized youths of color is a massive issue, solutions are not impossible. For instance, when I demonstrated an interest in returning to school and finding a job, my teacher, probation officer, and potential employer responded with empathy and compassion. They provided resources, opportunities, and second chances that created a trajectory of social mobility for me. But few of the young people I shadowed encountered these kinds of empathy or resources. The many youths I have followed who did not graduate from high school or achieve social mobility encountered a lack of opportunities and resources to develop the skills, not just to survive, but to thrive.

A "surviving" frame is one that allows young people to utilize the street-life skills that they have learned to persist in a world with few social and material resources. A "thriving" frame is one that influences young people to seek out the skills to accomplish conventional goals, like acquiring a job, doing well in school, and desisting from health-compromising behaviors. As I developed a "thriving" frame for becoming an adult, mentors taught me to recognize and utilize these opportunities. Finally, the opportunities that I was given were culturally relevant, resonated with my tastes, desires, and aspira-

tions, pulling me away from street life into a more conventional livelihood. As I moved beyond surviving to thriving, I remember telling myself when temptations arose to return to crime: “Don’t just do what you *gotta* do; do what you *have* to do.” I was reminding myself to utilize productive strategies for dealing with conflict, stress, and adversity. My sense of responsibility changed because I found a viable support system to enhance and promote a more positive, productive persona.

## Multiple Identities, Multiple Settings

Over the years, I have questioned what prompted me to shift drastically between a harmful street life and informal economy, the conventional labor market, and eventually back to school. In many ways, this was the motivation for this study. Was this kaleidoscope of multiple identities displayed within one day’s time unique to my life? Could other young people, caught up in the juvenile justice system and street life, also drift between different identities, and if so, under what conditions would each performance dominate?<sup>4</sup> What might be the implications for programs and policies if we were to recognize that young people indeed have the ability to shift seamlessly between conventional and deviant displays with minimal intervention and within a few hours’ time? What role could institutions play in providing young people with the resources for shifting between these presentations of self?

The research on juvenile delinquents that I have encountered seems to contradict my personal experience and that of the young people I have shadowed over the course of ten years. The literature typically depicts various dichotomous typologies—the street kid, the decent kid, the clean kid, the dirty kid—that are seemingly fixed with one master identity. But in the real world, there is no such thing as fixed types. The angry person is only angry for a set amount of time; after, we might find that he is sad, happy, excited, et cetera.<sup>5</sup> Identities also shift on a consistent basis. For example, consider the multiple identities that college students navigate. They can simul-

taneously be one or more of the following: young adults, athletes, obnoxious drunks, travelers, cheaters, daughters, boyfriends, drug users, deviants, assholes, and social justice champions.

Some of the street-life-oriented young people I have studied do present aggressive tendencies, at times. However, more common are young people who shift their practices, actions, and attitudes across short time spans (e.g., a few hours) and spaces (e.g., between school and the street). They may be persistently vulnerable, but they are hardly static in the ways in which they navigate their worlds. I have discovered that youths can consistently adopt different personae, and *institutions play an integral role in the types of performances these youths enact and the sorts of cultural frames they engage* (see Vigil 1988; Harding 2010; Conchas and Vigil 2012). Instead of thinking of people as fixed types, we should view them as actors dynamically responding on a stage with constantly shifting backdrop and scenery, their performances influenced by different settings and different actors they encounter. This process is difficult to analyze because in the real time in vivo world, the individuals we study continually and consistently shape-shift. Since we are trying to capture patterns and replicable understandings, we tend to write about people in one-dimensional, practicable ways. Researchers in many ways are like still photography cameras. We collect a plethora of images that represent the real world but these images can only portray specific, frozen in time moments. We should strive to be more like video cameras in that we represent the multiple dimensions that we encounter in the real world. Following young people across institutional settings allows us to see these multidimensions and the many impediments and supports various institutions provide.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand how this process of shifting personae operates among marginalized young people, I decided to shadow those considered a high threat in the community they lived in—gang members. Most books about gangs focus on the life stories, group processes, perspectives, structural impediments, criminal behaviors, life outcomes, or resistance strategies of gang members (see, e.g., Vigil 2002). Although such interrogations provide valuable

insights, this book takes a different tack to focus on the outcomes of interactions between gang-associated youths and the institutional actors they encounter. I utilize the phrase “gang-associated” to describe individuals who have been labeled or self-describe as gang members (typically, the former is more common). “Associated” helps to remind us that many gang members are actually gang members because they have been labeled as such. A “gang” is just that, a label. When we forget this caveat, we perpetuate ideas of inner-city youths as violent criminals—an identity often connected to gang member in conventional discourse. To understand the multiple dimensions of these young people that are typically seen as one-dimensional gangsters, I shadow them from multiple angles.

Let’s imagine that a helmet camera has been attached to the youths you will meet in this book, and what you see are snippets of youths’ experiences as they navigate multiple settings. This narrative view emerges from interviews, focus groups, and observations. In addition, let’s imagine the camera capturing these youths’ lives has a zoom-out lens so you can see the youths themselves, the institutional actors they encounter, and the settings they navigate. Let’s also imagine that another camera is recording from across the room or across the street, providing a vantage point from which I can make observations about the youths and their interactions with institutional actors. In this way, I have applied a triangulated method in which interviews, observations, and focus groups yield insights from various viewpoints in the field.<sup>7</sup> Readers who wish to learn more about this triangulated method and my “shadowing” approach may read the methodological appendix.

I am not interested in creating yet another sensationalistic or celebratory book about “ghetto denizens” or “gangbangers,” but rather in providing a deeper understanding of the processes by which authority figures fail to support young people and to recognize their multiple dimensions and multiple selves and how young people fail to demonstrate to the system their readiness to change. I show that as police and educators—often with good intention—try to reform or support young people, they create human targets: youths pro-

duced and portrayed as risks and criminal threats. As a result, they deliver punitive treatment at these youth, expecting a positive response. Instead of reforming, young people recognize this systematic targeting and look for ways to get the bull's-eye off their backs or to fight back. This targeting leads young people to drift between conventional and self-compromising identities, while authority figures also vacillate between restorative and punitive social control in dealing with these disreputable individuals.

## **Pernicious Fire**

Criminologist David Garland has argued that the United States has developed a culture of control. This culture of control is characterized by a deep-seated fear of crime; marginalized, primarily poor, populations rendered as criminal threats; the expansion of punitive legal sanctions; the obsessive focus on victims; and the manipulation of crime issues for political gain. Culture becomes a powerful, lone-standing vessel that helps to produce social marginalization through punitive mechanisms (Garland 2001b). But what does this culture of control look like in real time? How does it come to affect the lives of those individuals that become its targets? The aim of this book is to provide an ethnographic archaeology of the processes that this culture of control imposes on marginalized youths, and the cultural formations that circumscribe these young people's lives as they engage with punitive structures.

As human targets, young people inevitably encounter pernicious fire—the meting out on individuals any number of detrimental outcomes, such as institutional stigmatization, school suspensions or expulsions, police harassment and humiliation, or disproportionate arrest and incarceration. Pernicious fire can evoke a life of social misery—like when an individual is pushed out of school or granted a criminal record and is unable to find viable employment. The more that authority figures misunderstand and mistreat marginalized populations, the more likely they are to resort to pernicious fire. This notion of pernicious fire is both a metaphor for the continuum of

punitive treatment across institutional settings and an observation of the trajectory of social action that leads to lethal outcomes, like police killings of unarmed males of color.

In recent years in the United States, a spree of police shootings of unarmed young men of color has made national news. In 2016, Alton Sterling, a black male in Louisiana, and Pedro Villanueva, a Latino male in California, were both shot and killed by police. Both of them were unarmed. While Sterling's case made national headlines, Villanueva's killing did not receive much national media attention. It appears that when Latinos are killed by police, the national media does not pay as much attention to the issue, diminishing the story of the punitive and violent policing of Latinos in the United States. But, as I demonstrate in this book, poor Latino youths encounter punitive and violent police treatment that is also worthy of national attention.

Police killings of unarmed men of color have also spurred some of the most vibrant, massive, controversial, and prolific social movements among marginalized classes in recent history. Two more of many cases were the killings of Michael Brown and Andy Lopez. Michael Brown, an unarmed, black eighteen-year-old, was fatally shot by a white police officer on August 9, 2014, in the Saint Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's murder sparked near immediate protests in Ferguson as well as national media attention as residents called for an end to the pattern of police assaults on members of the black majority in a city with predominately white government officials (Bouie 2014; Schuman 2014). Andy Lopez, a thirteen-year-old Latino resident of Santa Rosa, California, was shot and killed by a white sheriff's deputy when the officer mistook Lopez's airsoft gun—a nonlethal replica of an AK-47—for an actual firearm. Similar to the Brown incident, protests were organized in Santa Rosa and throughout California to draw attention to an epidemic of police brutality (Alexander 2013). These young men represent just two examples in the national crisis of police misreading, misunderstanding, misjudging, and dehumanizing young males of color.

When police officers don't understand and fear the bodies, cul-

ture, and actions of young black and Latino men—when they misrecognize and misframe them—they can make reckless decisions that invite unjust treatment, violence, and even death. Police operate in a larger cultural context in which they are socialized and taught to fear males of color. From a very young age, some youths are constructed as human targets by this culture of control, and when they encounter police mistreatment and violence, many in society may have come to believe these young people deserve such targeting and even eradication, leading to a culture of impunity within law enforcement departments across the nation. When police are trained by their departments to shoot when they feel that their life is in jeopardy, these fears, combined with the a system of impunity that does not hold officers accountable for unjustified killings, can play a major role in the split-second decision to shoot and kill a black or Latino male. Within this culture of control, officers are implicitly taught and allowed to operate under the assumption that blacks and Latinos are a threat and that their lives don't matter. While most police stops do not end in a killing, many police stops do result in negative interactions. It is these micro-punitive processes that build up over time, leading to negative community-police relations, resentments toward police, and racist policing.

Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate in this book how our punitive attempts to help, regulate, and control disreputable youths can end up creating a larger crisis of control and can lead to school failure and police violence. The unfortunate outcomes are entire communities that are hyperpoliced and hyperincarcerated (see Rios 2011; Fader 2013; Goffman 2014), tens of thousands of dollars spent to imprison even one person each year (California spends \$47,421 in tax dollars per prisoner annually),<sup>8</sup> and the perpetuation and accentuation of the social misery that poverty already brings to these young people. This crisis of control plays out through culture: day-to-day practices, negative interactions, and contested symbols that come to frame young people's understanding of their social world.

If we want heroin-selling, gangbanging, car-thieving, juvenile delinquents to reform and work toward developing productive lives,

then institutions, especially schools and law enforcement, must find ways to improve the quality of their interactions with these youths, provide them with meaningful resources to thrive on, and celebrate and promote their innate ability to shift between a myriad of identities and personas. We must develop programs and policies that account for the multiple scenes and backdrops that these youths regularly encounter as they seamlessly shift with fluidity through various daily settings. The culture of control must be replaced with a culture of care; we must stop setting young people up as targets and instead treat them as seeds to be nurtured.

## Study Participants and Setting

I observed the institutional and personal stories of gang-associated young people in a Southern California community I have renamed “Riverland.” In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study, I have created pseudonyms for them, their community, and the city they are from. While descriptions and news reports might expose the location and identity of some of the participants in this study, I have done my best to report findings that minimize vulnerability that this study might place them in.

Many youths that I initially encountered had multiple stories of racism, humiliation, and punishment meted out by schools and police; I wanted to explore firsthand what they experienced as human targets. I sought to collect information from multiple angles to unearth the logic and practice of this targeting process, of this culture of control. I conducted five years of observations, from 2007 to 2012, and interviews on street corners and in parks, a community center, courtrooms, a probation school, and a conventional high school. The study began at Punta Vista, a school for youths on probation, where I eventually conducted two years of observations. At that school, I developed relationships with some youths from the south side, who facilitated my encounters with other out-of-school, gang-associated youths.

Throughout the study, I observed and interviewed fifty-seven



Latino gang-associated males between fifteen and twenty-one years old in various settings; interviewed and observed eighteen gang-associated females, primarily at Punta Vista School; and supervised fourteen focus groups with females and forty-two with males. In this particular community, gang-associated females had a less visible presence, and as a male researcher, I felt a limited ability to gain trust and shadow the young women I encountered. Latina women experience a very unique trajectory from that of Latino men in the criminal justice system (see Diaz-Coto 2006). In addition, my research objective was to try to understand a group that is disproportionately represented as human targets, bearing the brunt of harsh school discipline, arrest, and incarceration—young males of color. Therefore, I chose to focus primarily on male gang-associated youths, while drawing insights from the young women whom I managed to interview and informally observe.<sup>9</sup>

Over the years, a team of eight graduate students and fourteen undergraduate students helped me to conduct focus groups and interviews for this study. Their research was primarily conducted at the local community center where we met with gang-associated youths as a team once a week on Friday evenings over the course of four years and where I could supervise them as they helped to collect interview and focus group data. Although I organized a research team to help with this project, I alone collected the systematic observational data outside of the community center in order to maintain consistency and to avoid exposing students to risk. While some of my students went on to conduct observations for their own independent research projects, the fieldwork observations that I report on in this book are my own, unless otherwise reported with “we” instead of “I.” Chapter 3 was coauthored with Patrick Lopez-Aguado, chapter 4 was coauthored with Rachel Sarabia, and chapter 5 was coauthored with Samuel Gregory Prieto—all graduate students under my supervision at the time. They helped to collect and analyze data and to provide me with insight on my coding, theoretical memos, and preliminary conclusions, in order to ensure that at least one other person was seeing the patterns I uncovered in the field.

## Setting and Study

Riverland is a Southern California city known as an idyllic beachside community. Its beautiful coastal geography inflates real estate values, attracting development of hidden mansions along hillsides that offer scenic ocean views, as well as upscale boutiques along Beach Street, the main corridor for the downtown commercial district. Home to numerous theaters, museums, and vacation homes, the city sells itself as having the culture and sophistication of California's larger elite cities without the big-city problems of crime or poverty. Through the prioritizing and policing of public space, Riverland works hard to maintain the popular perception that it is exclusively wealthy and white.

But despite its tranquil image, Riverland is not immune from race and class conflicts. A few blocks from Beach Street, Chavez Avenue cuts through South Riverland as a kind of second main street, one that caters to the city's overlooked Latino population. Largely hidden from Riverland's projected image and rarely acknowledged in positive reporting by local media, Latinos comprise approximately 30 percent of the city's population, and most of these residents work in the low-wage service sector. South Riverland houses many residents of color, positioned as a servant class to the larger population, who struggle to survive in face of the extravagant cost of living, one of the nation's highest. Some of them live in dire conditions and express a desire for better living conditions. Thirty-one-year-old Cristina, mother of Rosy, a fourteen-year-old gang-associated girl, explained:

I would like them to have the basic resources they need. How do I help them, if I don't have the money? . . . Rosy doesn't get a good lunch. She comes home hungry, and I don't have much. I want to be able to provide them with the basics: shoes, food. I want to be able to feed my kids, to clothe them. I think that has a lot to do with how she acts. She gets frustrated with our situation. Frustrated over not having anything and living the life we live. I think this lifestyle is

what drives her to hang out with her friends in the street; drives her to stay on the streets with her sister rather than come home. They have food. She is probably tired of Top Ramen or Cup-o-Noodles, or canned vegetables or peas, but that is what I can afford and sometimes they are free from the church. We don't even have money for laundry detergent. We have been wearing dirty clothes for the last few days. We haven't washed in three weeks.

The youths in this community commonly find themselves publicly racially profiled as criminal others. The local division of labor that designates Latinos as low-end service workers who cater to wealthy residents and tourists reinforces racial tensions.<sup>10</sup> These status differences, which are most visible at school and in encounters with whites, remind youths of color that they are considered “dangerous, fearsome” people, a designation that is ironically both stigmatizing and empowering. The youths' responses are varied, but some turn to gang culture and life, like Rosy. Youths who adopt gang-associated attire find they have the power to cause a reaction—usually a negative one, within a context in which they are feared. Johny, a sixteen-year-old gang-involved Latino, explained:

If you go with your homies, they stare at you. Baggy clothes make you look suspicious . . . around here if you're walking in a little group. People are all scared of you. . . . If *gueros* [whites] are coming toward you, they'll get off the sidewalk so you can pass by. They're scared as fuck!

Latino youths report other encounters with white residents that serve to reinforce the local economic hierarchies. Johny continued:

I used to work at the farmers' market with my father, and there was white people that would give you attitude about the color skin that you are. 'Cause I'm working behind this table selling these things to you don't mean you have to be rude to me, 'cause you don't have to buy them from me and feel like I need you.<sup>11</sup>

Race and class become inextricably tangled as young Latinos are expected to represent a working class that serves the wealthier white locals. But rather than submit to class oppression and become “good workers” while being robbed of opportunities to obtain viable occupations, these youths become defiant against the exploitive status thrust upon them.<sup>12</sup> Within a culture of control, these young people have come to be feared and constructed as criminal threats rather than docile, exploitable, “well-behaved” workers.

In Riverland, race and class marginalization also occurs in schools. Sixteen-year-old Mary, a student who was expelled for fighting and sent to the probation school, Punta Vista, shared her perspective:

I think they feel that like white kids are like better . . . like Mexican kids are, I guess, like gang-related and I think they think they're like bad influences, and they think we're like not smart. They think that like white kids are . . . smart, and they're like good kids, they're like good influences. . . . You could tell how the teachers are like how they look at you before you even start dressing different.<sup>13</sup>

This criminal labeling becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for many youths of color. Another gang-associated male, sixteen-year-old Tito, experienced similar treatment and pinpointed an incident that strongly influenced his decision to adopt a “gang” style and drop out of school: “‘The teacher chose . . . me, and the white guy [a fellow student],’ he said, ‘Oh, he won’t know the answer. He’s Mexican.’ The teacher didn’t say anything.”

When I asked him how he felt about this, he said,

I felt like shit, so I just skip school. Go to a friend’s house, help my parents with work, do drugs, fucking just go look for fights, go to Beach Street. Just anything rather than school. I hate school.

For many of these youths, school becomes a place where they feel disrespected and reprimanded rather than educated, and as a re-

sult, they develop an oppositional stance toward educational institutions and seek alternative spaces for acceptance and affirmation (Dance 2002). One such surrogate is the street and gang life. Once associated with this world, young people find it more difficult to succeed in school and the labor market, and they get caught up in the criminal justice system. Institutional labels and the way in which institutions treat these gang-associated youths play a role in young people's well-being.

## What's in a Label?

After gathering data in the field for a year, I developed a conceptual and theoretical framework in order to understand the processes by which labeling shaped the kinds of cultural and material resources, and by default life outcomes, that marginalized Latino youths encountered. This section describes the conceptual and theoretical framework I utilize and develop. Readers who wish to immediately learn more about the youths in this study, their contexts, and their stories may skip to chapter 1.

To be “from the south side” carried multiple meanings in Riverland. One could have grown up there, resided in a south side neighborhood, or be formally labeled as a member of the south side gang by schools or law enforcement. This ambiguous labeling created immense problems for law enforcement, schools, and the media as they sought to determine who was a gang member and who was not. Often, these parties—along with social scientists—have been content with a loose definition of a gang member that could be applied to youths who wear symbols, enact mannerisms, hang out in specific areas, and represent specific racialized populations. Entire books on “gangs” have been written by social scientists without clearly defining how they determined gang membership. Decker and Van Winkle's *Life in the Gang* (1996) is one example. In describing gang activity and behavior, these authors make it appear as if all the youths in the community they studied were gang members. The uncritical assumption that these and other “gang experts” make is

that living in poverty, being of color, and having a tight-knit group of friends renders one a gang member and, therefore, an ideal research subject.<sup>14</sup> Gang researchers must reflect on the process by which they determine gang membership, and find strategies for determining if their definitions hold any value in the real world, prior to conducting their studies. Otherwise, they risk misrepresenting the lives of marginalized youths and influencing practice and policy based on fallacy.

For this research, I sought to bypass simplistic, racist labels devoid of empirical evidence that are frequently applied to urban youths of color. Instead, I refer to the boys in this study as “gang-associated.” To be gang-associated is to be perceived as, self-reported as, or informally or formally labeled (typically by law enforcement or schools) as an actual gang member. The reason I utilize this label is to address the ambiguity that exists in the study of gangs. “Associated” here refers to those cognitive, institutional, or interactional processes by which individuals are connected to the gang life. This line of reasoning helps us acknowledge that the research and writing we conduct is also embedded within a larger culture of control that influences the intersubjective construction of reality that our work produces. In other words, researchers can be just as complicit in constructing marginalized populations as criminal threats in need of regulation and control.

How do we know who is a gang member? Sometimes, when young people self-report, they have their own arbitrary definitions of what a gang is. Some believe a crew of three friends with a moniker for their group is a gang; others believe that you are not a gang member until you have been officially initiated by a street gang under the jurisdiction of a recognized prison gang, such as the Mexican Mafia or *Nuestra Familia*. In one instance, police formally entered a fourteen-year-old in a statewide gang database—CalGang, hosted and supported by the California Department of Justice—simply because he wore a hat bearing his childhood nickname, *Flaco* (Skinny), on the bottom flap. Was he a gang member? Other times, without any justification other than their biased judgment or a few disciplinary

incidents, or the youth's tough demeanor, school officials have been convinced that a kid is a gang member. The youth is labeled and treated accordingly: zero-tolerance dress codes, assignment to special programs, and interactions based on disdain, pity, or fear.

The gang label is a powerful one that generates specific resources, actions, and interactions within the various institutions these young people must navigate.<sup>15</sup> For example, during my time in the field, researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara, had helped to create a "risk assessment" instrument for the county probation department to survey probation youths about their attitudes toward violence and crime. The youths were also asked whether their relatives were gang involved or in jail or prison. The intent was to collect data on the resources that these young people needed to facilitate their reform. During four court observations, I witnessed prosecutors using these instruments to make a case against some of the boys.<sup>16</sup> The logic: If the young man reported that his older brother was in jail and in a gang, then he was at risk of committing a crime as well and, therefore, should be given a harsher sentence to prevent that crime from occurring.<sup>17</sup>

According to criminologist and former gang member Robert Durán (2013), gang membership is socially constructed, and "there is nothing [finite] that establishes when people join or leave." Therefore, it is difficult to determine who is a gang member and when the person joins or leaves the gang. Research has shown that "most people fade away from the gang scene" (Durán 2013, 24) as they mature. But despite the fact that most gang members have been found to disengage from gang activity within two to three years from initiation, the effects of the gang label last much longer. When law enforcement or schools label a young person as a gang member, that youth is likely to face grave consequences independent of any possible criminal activity he may engage in, past, present, or future. These consequences might include indefinite registry in the gang databases, automatic gang enhancements if convicted of a future crime, stigma and negative treatment from authority figures, and injunctions prohibiting being physically present in certain loca-

tions, including educational facilities such as high schools and community colleges. In this study, I found that gang labeling resulted in stigma, exclusion, and subsequent arrests, even years after the youngsters had left the street life.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the findings in this study and insight from Brotherton and Barrios's (2004) gang definition, I developed a working definition for the gang: a group process that occurs as marginalized young people attempt to provide each other, within a collective context, a dignified identity, "an opportunity to feel individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to, challenge," and engage the dominant culture and institutions of social control, "a refuge from the stresses and strains of poverty," and a protective factor—a surrogate—that functionally and perceivably replaces the role that institutions of socialization and support (schools, the family, the welfare system) have failed to provide. In essence, a gang, and a gang member, are not a what but a how (Vigil 2002). They are not things or people; they are processes. In the United States, the gang label is heavily racialized. In the media and with law enforcement, a group of Latino or black youths committing a crime is likely to be labeled as a gang. This is not the case with groups of white youths who commit similar crime (Covington 2010).

Because a gang is socially constructed, its definition must be fluid enough to allow for local context, nuanced group processes, and the autonomous power of labeling. By extension, if an institution defines a group of disreputable youths as a gang, then regardless of any specific characteristics or function, that group is, in effect, a gang. Institutional power defines who is a gang member and what constitutes a gang threat. Once defined, we must account for the racialized response to this perceived gang threat, the quality of interactions between the gang and authority figures, the group and cultural processes that ensue from this label, and the reactions provoked. To understand young people who have been labeled as gang members, we must observe them in various facets of their lives, at different times and space points, and across different settings. We must also



understand their multiple selves. A cultural framing perspective helps in this endeavor.

## Cultural Framing

Cultural framing offers an analytical tool for understanding the role that institutions play in influencing young peoples' worldviews and actions. A cultural frame is a system of meaning-making, identity formation, and presentation of self based on material and symbolic resources that influence peoples' perceptions of the world and of their choice of actions and behaviors. Sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) describes this system as a cultural "toolkit" that individuals use to develop "strategies of action" (273).<sup>19</sup> Cultural frames influence how individuals think about their social and personal mobility and "how they choose to act" (Young 2004, 11). All populations in society draw upon a variety of cultural models, often coexisting simultaneously, to inform their actions. An array of cultural frames comprises an individual's understanding of the world and this "system of meaning" serves as the basis for future behavior (Geertz 1973). Likewise, individuals living in poverty are not bound by a fixed value system, but are surrounded by multiple cultural frames—what David Harding (2010) refers to as "cultural heterogeneity"—that offer various models for shaping perceptions, worldviews, and actions.<sup>20</sup> Social psychology research offers a similar conception—shape shifting—the intricate process of identity change (see Burke and Stets 2009; Alvermann et. al. 2006).

Culture provides resources from which individuals can draw to shape the outcomes of their actions, and structural opportunities determine which resources individuals will utilize in the various contexts they navigate. So when a young person has a negative interaction with an authority figure who represents a specific institution, the frames that inform the young person's actions are limited to a minimal selection of responses, often either to resist or reject the system, to develop what sociologist L. Janelle Dance calls

“tough fronts” (2005). A healthy selection of responses might include asking for a meeting to address the issue, writing a letter to the school district, or having parents or lawyers intervene (assuming that these actions will be taken seriously by the system). However, these responses are limited by class or by the school’s unwillingness to allow for these kinds of kids to respond in these kinds of ways. In this way, institutions play a key role in the process by which individuals encounter and utilize cultural frames. Schools and law enforcement can either help young people resonate with productive frames or hinder their connection with these frames.

Cultural frames structure how we interpret events and how we react to them, though the relationship between culture and behavior is not “cause-and-effect,” but rather “a relationship that highlights constraint-and-possibility” (Small 2004). Although the youths in this study were influenced by cultural frames in near proximity—for example, gangsterism, defiance, and criminality—these frames did not cause their actions, but only made certain kinds of behavior more recognizable, accessible, and likely.

A cultural frames approach offers a more nuanced way to view young people’s behaviors and reactions than the “typologies” model—the angry kid, the gang member, the decent type, dirty people, clean people—which assigns labels to individuals based on recurring observed attributes or based on labels imposed by others in the community. This approach renders individuals incapable of acting any other way. With a cultural frames approach, or what I refer to as an “Urban Dynamism” approach, we allow ourselves the capability to observe individuals change their dispositions and behaviors based on their encounters with power (in this case institutions) and as they cross institutional settings. David Harding (2010) provides a compelling theoretical model for understanding inner-city youths through a cultural framing perspective. This model has the potential to move urban ethnography, criminology, and other research on poor populations beyond typologizing approaches that caricaturize and at times even pathologize the populations we study.<sup>21</sup>

Harding argues that young people living in poverty have access to conventional cultural models, such as acquiring a college educa-

tion or becoming responsible parents, and, indeed, aspire to achieve these goals; however, with limited resources to reach their aspirations, they inevitably follow other stronger models that resonate the most with their lived experience. Thus, cultural heterogeneity takes a different form in low-income settings based on the neighborhood context. Take, for example, the youngster in a poor neighborhood who aspires to go to college. His single mother may constantly push him to achieve his goal, but his peers on the streets and older siblings may support an alternative, survival-based frame: make some money to make ends meet. From their viewpoint, the strongest indicator of success may mean evading arrest or living another day without being victimized. Although an educational credential may be a highly valued aspiration, the immediate neighborhood context makes it a far-fetched idea and a less valuable indicator of success for these young people. As sixteen-year-old Mario phrased it, “A piece of paper [high school diploma] ain’t gonna work as a bullet-proof vest or stop the *puercos* [pigs] from violating me [arrest for violating terms of probation].”

Cultural heterogeneity exists in all social environments among all social groups; however, poor neighborhoods lack resources to support certain specific cultural frames. Therefore, the more positive aspiration (going to college) can be diluted and less influential, while the negative, more immediate goal (surviving violence, staying out of trouble) can be amplified. This process, which Harding calls “model shifting,” occurs when young people adopt the salient frames for their neighborhood context.

Harding’s study focused on the influence of neighborhoods and peers, but did not analyze the role authority figures and institutional powers play in shaping the cultural models that influence young people’s understandings and actions. In this study of Riverland youths, I examine how young people’s model shifting unfolds across institutional settings—the probation school, the streets, the community center, the conventional high school, and the legal system—and the role that institutional actors play in how young people interpret and utilize cultural frames. In other words, institutional

processes have a profound influence on the cultural models available to youths and the cultural models that young people choose to engage with. For example, Mark, a fifteen-year-old gang-associated student, wanted to go to college, and he even demonstrated that he knew the steps needed to obtain a four-year college degree, as in this conversation with me:

V.R.: Do you know the steps needed to get to college, to get a degree?

MARK: Get some, like two years of CC [community college] classes and get good grades. Then I apply to transfer to get a business degree.

V.R.: What prevents you from taking these steps, what obstacles do you face?

MARK: A bunch of lame-ass shit. Like my record and my grades and my attitude and these dumb-ass probation officers and teachers that don't get me. . . . Every day, I guess, it's like I just have to avoid getting caught up, staying legit.

V.R.: You sound like you know what it takes to stay legit. Why do you think you still get caught up even though you know how to avoid it?

MARK: You can leave the streets, but the streets aren't gonna leave you. At the end of the day that's all you got. Your homies there waiting, backing you up, needing a favor . . . but the school side what does it have to offer you?

To Mark, planning for college represented a relevant, albeit muted, system of ideas and practices that signaled his desire to extend his education and someday become a professional. Another positive frame was “staying legit,” which meant avoiding academic failure, victimization, incarceration, and acquiring resources through legitimate economic and financial means. Youths like Mark could be drawn to these positive frames, but authority figures' either subtle or overt countermessages may result in them turning back to the street—a landscape with a stronghold on the boys' decision making.

Indeed, as I examined the quality of interactions between youths and authority figures, I uncovered how cultural heterogeneity functions across institutional settings and how it's impacted by institutional power. To deal with youths' disreputable behaviors, police and school officials attempted to incorporate young people's alternative "street" frames into the informal rules and interactions they propagated. As a result, good or neutral intentions often constructed negative outcomes.

Negative interactions can determine worldviews and outcomes for marginalized young people. Authority figure–youth interactions were dominated by misrecognition: the process by which an individual fails in understanding the meaning and intentions attached to the cultural framing that the other is engaged in. When students' actions were misinterpreted, they responded with resistance.<sup>22</sup> Resistance became cognition: Young people became aware of the crisis of control and institutional failure to regulate their behavior and, in turn, consciously attempted to persist and generate alternative protective factors. A failure of control at school and other institutions produced collective identities, frames of resistance, and protective mechanisms among these marginalized youths. This, in turn, fueled the culture of control, resulting in harsher interactions and punishments. The quality of interactions between youths and authorities had a tremendous impact on youths' attitudes and decisions, which, in turn, profoundly affected their lives as they neared adulthood. Schools and police, like the streets, limited the cultural models young people could realistically pursue, and those limitations shaped how they engaged with authority figures. I first observed these processes of cultural (mis)framing at the local probation school, Punta Vista, where my study began.

Punta Vista served as a revealing opening site for this research because the various forces I sought to study seemed to converge there: the culture of control, cultural heterogeneity, gang-associated youths, delinquent youths, high school dropouts (more sensible label: pushouts), probation officials, police, educators, and community and social services.