



University of Illinois scholar John Hagedorn: We need to recognize that young kids have some different needs

EXCLUSIVE



John M. Hagedorn is professor of criminal justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and author of several books on gangs, most recently 'Gangs on Trial: Challenging Stereotypes and Demonization in the Courts', published by Temple University Press in 2022.

To begin with, how should we understand the gangs that the youth form? Because, in several cases at least in my society, where the phenomenon seems to be rather emerging, they seem to be able to be rather benign groupings.

Certainly, the first principle is that every situation is different. What's going on in different cities is not the same thing as what's going on elsewhere. However, we do know that whether it's Chicago in the early 20th century or the Chinese cities of the last couple of decades, when people come to cities from the countryside in large numbers, their kids tend to hang out in gangs. The old ties of authority and the countryside are there to be rebelled against in the city. You have a whole new world that's happening. So, forming gangs is normal. In this situation, it's normal. We see it around the world.

What you described to me, briefly, is also pretty normal as there are many different ways that gangs can form, and there are many different kinds of more serious problems. It's one of the things that, I think, we've learned from studying gangs, that when these kids

are forming these wild groups, it's important not to decide that this is basically a legal problem, a problem for police, a problem to crack down. Because these are kids that can go all sorts of different ways.

A hundred years ago, when they first studied gangs in Chicago, you had all these little groups of kids who were fighting with one another over different ethnicities, religions, one neighborhood against the other. However, in some neighborhoods, organized crime was very strong, and the kids moved into the Italian neighborhoods and moved into organized crime. In other neighborhoods, for instance, in the Irish neighborhoods, the political machine was very strong. So, the kids were pulled into elections and pulled into making sure that the Irish candidates won. But often the mistake is from legal authorities, "Oh my gosh, we have a crime problem here." And the police are the answer to that, which typically makes things worse. They need to be more discerning of which groups to look at and which ones to just try to figure out how to divert into something else.

So, my impression from your point is that the authorities need to treat them on a case by case basis.

They need to make a concrete investigation. So often there are gangs, and some of them are criminals, and then, they're all looked at as criminals. The really good police officers, the people who are there on the streets, they know the difference between the kids who are screwing up, doing things that are sort of rebellious, or whatever, and those that are serious about illegal business. So, in a way, it's good intelligence, but it means that the police have to make sure they're being surgical in their operations and not painting with a really broad brush, taking up everybody that's involved with rebellious activities and treating them as criminals.

So, can we assume that some deeper underlying troubles might steer such gangs towards criminal activities?

Somewhat. An organized crime is a function of the lack of opportunity in areas where job opportunities aren't there, where there's not another legitimate outlet for

kids. If you don't see a future, you turn to crime. The best example is today in Chicago on the south and west sides in the black communities where you have no hope at all. There's an official 50% unemployment rate among the youth in the black community in Chicago. So, why would you not expect people to look to try to make some money in petty crime?

So, on the one hand, you have to deal with the lack of opportunities. On the other hand, organized crime is not just about a lack of opportunities. It's an institution. There's an international criminal economy, there's the trafficking of drugs worldwide, and there are people that are very serious. In the case of the cartels in Chicago, who are bringing the drugs in, there's not a lack of opportunity. These are millionaires that are doing this stuff. This is a very big-time business.

So, again, what you're asking for with law enforcement is to use their heads, to try to make distinctions. Instead, where there aren't job opportunities, we should pressure the government to provide them. There are things where there needs to be policies

and need to be tailored to the situation.

One of the lessons of Chicago is that organized crime is a constant. It's been there and it's been allied with the political machine. It can stay so strong only with support. It doesn't flourish without corruption. In Chicago, we've had organized crime since the 19th century. It's changing, but it's an ongoing institution. And kids are attracted to the power and the money that goes along with it.

What should be done in regards to the very young people who join gangs and perhaps commit criminal activities? Do you see a rising trend in such cases?

I don't know if it's a trend. When you go back a hundred years in Chicago, you see pre-adolescents who are involved with gangs. So, I think it's more of a constant that very young people are attracted to wild groups, gangs, etc. It's the same issue that we've been talking about. You got to treat a nine-year-old differently than an 18-year-old. For a nine-year-old, providing jobs isn't the answer. My friends on the west side of Chicago, where the rates of vio-

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