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Gangs, gangsters, and the impact of settler colonialism on the Latina/o experience

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Abstract

As the largest minority group in the United States, Latinas/os have experienced a long history of discrimination, prejudice, and stigmatization as gang members. A contemporary survey of law enforcement agencies reported that Latinos continue to be the largest proportion of any racial or ethnic group involved in gangs. To describe such a pattern, the framework of settler colonialism will be utilized to describe differential experiences based on race, gender, and how structural inequalities vary by region and time. Latinas/os have been particularly impacted by segregation, second-class treatment, and policies considered racially neutral. Gangs provide a topical area for examining patterns of racialization and social control. The authors of this article will outline the research literature on gangs and how settler colonialism has impacted the Latina/o population regarding the origination of gangs, reasons for joining, behaviors and activities, and the process for leaving these groups. The authors emphasize decolonization strategies including reducing structural inequalities and thereby reducing gang membership and risky behaviors. Until this can be accomplished, the authors hope for human rights, labor equity, and religious organizing efforts that can form into social movements of collective empowerment and justice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 1943, sociologist Emory Bogardus reported "Not all zoot-suiters are members of gangs, only a small percentage. Not all gangsters are Mexican-Americans, only a small fraction. Not all Mexican-American youth are gang minded,

only a small proportion" (p. 55). Bogardus used data he had collected to reduce the level of panic spread by the *Los Angeles Times* regarding the Zoot Suit Riots. In the summer of 1943, enraged White military soldiers sought out young Latino men for physical attack and to strip them of their clothing. Despite scholarly attempts to empirically counter paranoia, various political and policy-related efforts have been used to target Latinas/os by merging this ethnic group with the topic of gangs.[1] Many studies on Latina/o gangs or gang members have focused on increased delinquent or criminal offending, greater exposure to public health risks such as substance use, sexual activity, and violent victimization which lead to greater probabilities for arrest, incarceration, and death. How did the United States society get to this point in time when its largest minority group encounters a different social experience and response compared to White people? How did gangs become a part of this story? What patterns and trends can the research literature provide to help understand how gangs originate, the impact these groups have on members, and if gang involvement results in a damaged future? The answer to these questions involves a combination of scholarly disciplines, methodologies, and critical analyses. The theory of settler colonialism and its variations provide a helpful framework for examining unequal social environments, differential treatment, and an understanding of how racialization changes by time and place (Glenn, 2015; Go, 2018; Hernández, 2017; Veracini, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). The purpose of this article will be to provide a general review of the scholarly literature on gangs, gang members, and how such an analysis is dependent upon the framework of settler colonialism in order to better describe the historical and contemporary impact of such groups on the Latina/o experience.[2]

Research on Latinas/os and gangs can largely be divided into two areas. One segment of the research provides a historical overview of the ethnic group experience and how issues involving neighborhood contexts, generational status, and discrimination resulted in the creation of gangs and how these social groups impact the lives of members. Another portion of the literature focuses on the topic of gangs generally utilizing quantitative research and how Latinas/os were simply part of the overall sample for which variable controls were used to explain statistically significant differences. In the United States, Latina/o/x has become an umbrella pan-ethnic term to capture the experiences of residents who share a somewhat common history, features, and culture yet exhibit an array of skin colors and physical traits that go beyond traditional racial classifications of White or Black (Beltrán, 2010; Gómez, 2007; Martinez, 2015; Molina, 2010; Mora, 2014). In 2018, Latinas/os were estimated to be the largest minority group in the country with 18.3% of the population or approximately 59.8 million residents, which was an increase from 14 million residents or 6.4% of the population in 1980 (Hernández-Nieto, Gutiérrez, & Moreno-Fernández, 2017; Martinez, 2015; United States Census Bureau, 2018). Sociologist Ramiro Martinez (2015) emphasized Latinos were "both old and new." Martinez reported how most Latinos were born in the United States, yet problems associated with immigrants in the public imagination (e.g., loss of jobs, community disorder, political impact, and crime) were often not based on facts. Researchers emphasize differing experiences based on generation status and nationality (Dohan, 2003; Menjívar & Bejarano, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Most Latinas/os are descendants of Mexico (63.2%), Puerto Rico (9.5%), Cuba (3.9%), El Salvador (3.7%), and the Dominican Republic (3.3%; Hernández-Nieto et al., 2017).[3]

To develop an analysis capable of examining the complexities of race and ethnicity, the authors incorporate the theoretical framework of settler colonialism. Historian Kelly Hernández (2017) stated how the particular form of conquest and colonization regarding the United States fits the model of settler colonialism as it was not based on resource extraction but rather the control of land and the extermination of indigenous people. Settler colonialism as a theoretical explanation for Latina/o inequality in the United States has existed in various forms including colonialism, internal colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism (Barrera, 1979; Césaire, 2000; Go, 2018; Murgía, Murguía, 1975; Navarro, 2005). The central difference of settler colonialism involves the primary motive of the group in power: access to territory without a desire to return to the native country (Glenn, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). Such a framework emphasizes the role of history, and for Latinas/os, particularly Mexican Americans, includes the conquest of the southwestern portion of the United States, which was once part of Mexico (1821–1848), Spain (1598–1821), and indigenous lands during the past 16,000 years. Currently, the largest proportion of Latinas/os reside in the southwestern states of New Mexico (48.5%), Texas (39.1%), California (38.9%), Arizona (30.5%), and Nevada (28.5%;

Hernández-Nieto et al., 2017). Settler colonialism also offers analyses regarding the changing tactics of control used against racialized groups over regions and time (Glenn, 2015). For example, sociologist Alfredo Mirandé (1987, 2018) reported Chicanos and Chicanas in the United States have experienced a double standard of justice with one system applied to Anglo-Americans and another to Mexicans. Such differential legal and judicial treatment has resulted in a legacy of conflict involving displacement from land and criminalization albeit experiencing victimization from the state. Thus, an awareness of history, colonization, and demographics provide a base for examining the patterns involving Latinas/os and gangs.

2 | GANG PATTERNS AND LATINAS/OS

2.1 | The origination of gangs: Unequal social environments, inclusion, and an outlaw status[4]

Studies on the origination of gangs in the United States primarily begin by explaining how White ethnic groups whose parents were born in European countries first established social groups. Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang* published in 1927 is considered the first scholarly book on gangs. Thrasher estimated that based on 880 gangs in Chicago, most (87%) were children of European immigrants with an overrepresentation from Poland, Ireland, and Italy. Belonging to a gang united individuals who experienced less integration into American traditions, customs, and institutions in which conflict occurred due to territorial disputes rather than race or nationality. At the time, Thrasher did not believe Chicago was unique but rather experiencing "disordered conditions" present in several cities nationwide. William Foote Whyte (1943, p. 273), another early gang researcher who conducted ethnographic research from 1937 to 1940, argued that it was not necessarily social disorganization for Italians in Boston that led to neighborhood challenges for social mobility, but rather the "…failure of its [Italian] own social organization to mesh with the structure of the society around it." Residents were blocked by the lack of opportunity in the larger society and experiencing challenges regarding how to be successful in their own ethnic enclaves. Success in larger society resulted in alienation in the community, whereas success in the neighborhood resulted in becoming a social outcast to respectable people elsewhere.

To date, most studies on Latinos/as and gangs have occurred primarily in the Southwest except for the cities such as Chicago and New York. These studies have emphasized how Latino residents were segregated into neighborhoods defined as barrios (Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993). Barrios had higher levels of poverty, fewer occupational opportunities, limited political inclusion, and were characterized by populations with lower levels of education. In her study of Chicano gangs, sociologist Joan Moore (1978) described the economy within such barrios as a segmented labor market for which Chicanos often held unstable jobs that were part-time, provided below average wages, and offered no possibility for advancement. Immigration provided a population base that included varying generations of Latinas/os living in similar spaces. Segregated spaces created the location for which family members and friends relied upon each other collectively to resolve problems and provide needed services. It is in such a geographic space and within particular time periods that we find Latino youth organizing into groups later defined as gangs: El Paso during the Mexican Revolution (Durán, 2018), Los Angeles and San Antonio during the 1930s (Moore, 1991; Tapia, 2017), Denver during the 1940s (Durán, 2013), and Chicago during the 1950s (Horowitz, 1983). Sociologist Joan Moore (1991) stated that in the 1930s and 1940s, male youth were simply known as "the boys from the barrio" (p. 25). Most of the accounts from gang members, gang associates, and members of the larger community describe these social groups not based on a vision of menace or destruction but rather self-protection.

Additional groups formed around shared nationalities, generation status, gender, incarceration, organizational aspirations, and even language after the first gangs were already in existence (Correa-Cabrera, 2017; Gundur, 2019; Hagedorn, 2015; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Padilla, 1992; Ward, 2013). Criminologist R.V. Gundur (2019), for example, describes the organizational evolution of an inmate solidarity group for Hispanic prisoners from the El Paso/

Ciudad Juárez region that later evolved into becoming a major player in the drug market and violence on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border. He explained how the deportation of members of this criminal organization allowed the group to take form in both countries. In the Americas, transnational criminal organizations have become multinational/transnational corporations (Correa-Cabrera, 2017). Correa-Cabrera described how the criminal organization called the Zetas shared similarities with transnational extractive industries such as Exxon Mobil Corporation, Halliburton Company, and Constellis Holdings, LLC.

Based on 26 years of data obtained from observation, interviews, and historical and comparative analysis, the regions in the southwest where most Latinas/os live were very different from White communities (Durán, 2013, 2018). Depending on the historical origination, some of the neighborhoods have been able to provide a buffer to acts of discrimination through protest and agitation, whereas newer destination communities experience higher patterns of minority group threat and moral panics. Quantitative data offers additional support. Peterson and Krivo (2010) studied 8,931 census tracts in 87 cities nationwide to examine levels of racial structure, segregation, and crime. They found Latino neighborhoods with "above-average disadvantage," Black neighborhoods with "extreme level of disadvantage," and White neighborhoods with "very low disadvantage." Over time, most of the poor, isolated, and resource deprived neighborhoods for ethnic White groups (i.e., Irish, Italians, and Polish) have become assimilated into "very low disadvantage" White communities. In contrast, Blacks have continued to experience levels of hypersegregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Massey & Tannen, 2015). Although Latinas/os and Blacks were often concentrated in different sections of the country (e.g., Latinas/os in the southwest and Blacks in the southeast), cities where these two groups occupy similar settings have resulted in differential levels of access and exclusion. In terms of gangs, certain neighborhoods exemplify more reasons for gang origination. For example, a study of 93 neighborhoods in Mesa, Arizona examining the relationship between neighborhood structure, violent crime, and concentrations of gang members found that gang membership was less likely to occur in social contexts that had a residentially unstable population or rapidly changing structural conditions (Katz & Schnebly, 2011). Gangs were more likely to exist in neighborhoods with higher levels of economic deprivation and social/familial disadvantage. In addition, many Latina/o communities have heightened forms of overpolicing, underpolicing, and enhanced scrutiny by federal agents, which increases criminal justice consequences (Durán, 2013, 2018; Rios, 2011, 2017). To synthesize all of these challenges, anthropologist James Diego Vigil (1988, p. 9) created the concept of multiple marginality to describe how various processes occurring at the macrolevel, mesolevel, and microlevels interacted to "…encompass the consequences of barrio life, low socioeconomic status, street socialization and enculturation, and problematic development of a self-identity." Vigil (2019) explains how being left out of mainstream society has relegated some youth to the margins of society with few conventional options or resources.

2.2 | The process and proportion of youth joining gangs: Resisting assimilation in a conquered nation

Although the merging of various structural conditions (poverty, segregation, under employment, educational obstacles) increases the presence of gangs, this does not mean most youth will join these groups. Group associations are a normal aspect of socialization, and access to specific groups change with age, institution, and location. Gangs are primarily neighborhood-based organizations requiring that members be loyal and pledge allegiance to a territory or region (Contreras, 2018; Durán, 2013; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988, 2007). Anthropologist Mendoza-Denton (2008) described the fluidity by which individuals decide which groups they fit in with better based on a concept she created: hemispheric localism. Based on her fieldwork in a high school in California, she observed students "take sides" based on a number of factors including language use, language ideology, perceived phenotype/race, performative speech act, country of origin, perceived economic position, social class prior to immigration, and neighborhood residence. She found youth exercising agency in selecting and maintaining which identities were important to uphold.

Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991) 10-year study of gangs in several cities described joining a gang as a two-way street where the gang expresses interest in the individual as does the potential recruit. Thus, he found that commitment to the community was the most prevalent reason for Chicano and Irish youth to join gangs. James Diego Vigil (2007) emphasized how there was a continuum involving agent effects, push effects, pull effects, and interrupter effects that resulted whether someone was a nonmember or a core member. In a previous study, Vigil (1988) reported how his concept of "choloization" captured how gang youth strived to attain an identity that had not been Anglicized. The gang was acting to "…resocialize members of the group to internalize and adhere to alternative norms and modes of behavior" (p. 63–64). Mendoza-Denton (2008) described how even fair-skinned Latinas did not want to appear white, and so they used make-up, language, and style of dress to remain tied to their own subculture. Lachman, Roman, and Cahill's (2013) interviews with youth resulted in 70% of the respondents reporting they joined a group to belong with people similar to themselves, make friends (46.5%), fill up empty time (33%), and feel like they belong to something (28%). Lopez and Brummett's (2003) study of incarcerated youth gang offenders in California found that these youth had higher levels of Mexican orientation than nongang members: They were more likely to have Mexican friends, associate with Mexicans, and self-identify as Mexican and less likely to have Anglos as friends or accept Anglo attitudes. The youth were more marginalized from Anglo society but not Mexican culture. Many researchers have described the attempt to emulate a Pachuco/a style and a form of speech known as caló as reflective of a hybridization of mixing different cultures together. Felix Padilla (1992) emphasized how for the young Puerto Rican youth he interviewed, maintaining a sense of culture despite being kept at the bottom of society was an important component of their identity. They had internalized societal self-hatred, and thus, as a defense strategy, they strived to become more Puerto Rican or Mexican, thereby defying subordination. Barrett, Kuperminc, and Lewis (2013) found no significant differences in overall gang activity or delinquency between immigrant and U.S.-born youth in Atlanta, GA, but they did find that discrimination stress predicted higher levels of gang involvement for U.S.-born youth. The authors explained this pattern in relation to the concept of "immigrant optimism" where immigrant youth have a frame of reference (countries of origin) to compare whereas U.S.-born youth only have known the experiences here. The gang literature has emphasized how the 1.5 generation or later was often the most involved with gang activity (Durán, 2018; Vigil, 1988, 2007).

Although not all gangs are the same, most people join gangs that are ethnically and/or racially homogenous (Gravel, Allison, West-Fagan, McBride, & Tita, 2018). Growing up in high-poverty, segregated neighborhoods increases the chances that residents will have a family member or friend with current or past ties to a gang. Many gangs used an initiation process involving the potential member physically fighting several members at the same time known as a "jump in."

Although most youth growing up in high-poverty, segregated neighborhoods do not join gangs, they risk being considered "square" or "different" by gang-involved peers (Horowitz, 1983; Moore, 1978). Gang-involved youth sometimes ascribe such characteristics to individuals who are considered decent, compassionate, and humble, that is people living a conventional lifestyle with steady jobs and families (Moore, 1978, 1991). Sociologist Ruth Horowitz (1983) explained how it is often difficult for members of barrio communities to enter and exist in the individualistic Anglo world of social relationships. Being different often results in not being of either world, and she believed that only activists had learned to create their own local subculture and solidarity to exist in such places. Nevertheless, the research literature on Latina/o communities has also emphasized how gang associates are often considered gang members by teachers, law enforcement, and even rival gangs (Durán, 2013; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Rios, 2017). Sociologist Randol Contreras (2018) described his observations and interviews of young Black and Brown men in Los Angeles who were not members of a gang and how they were constantly confronted with the question of "Where you from!?" In order to prevent victimization, residents worked to evade encounters with gang members and attempted to de-escalate threatening confrontations with a claim that they were "from nowhere." Contreras reported how simple daily activities often left marginalized young men paranoid because despite attempting to not present a threat to gang members, the honesty and accuracy of their words were determined by a variety of factors including race, space, and time.

To determine the proportion of Latinas/os who join gangs requires incorporating various data sources involving surveys of law enforcement agencies, surveys of schools, and observational and interview data. Based on a nationally representative sample of law enforcement agencies, The National Gang Center's National Youth Gang Survey reports the largest proportion of gang members from 1996 to 2011 were Latino. In 2011, 46.2% of the estimated 782,500 gang members were Latino, 35.3% Black, 11.5% White, and 7% other. These percentages were much greater than U.S. census data demographics, which estimated 16.3% of the population in 2010 was Latino. Thus, Latinos were three times more likely than population numbers to be considered gang members by law enforcement officers and four times greater than Whites. Blacks were 2.7 times more likely than population numbers to be considered gang members and three times greater than Whites. Whites were six times *less* likely than population numbers to be considered a gang member. The National Youth Gang Survey estimated 92.6% of gang members were male, and 7.4% were female. The problematic encounters between law enforcement and the Latina/o community has been reported in several studies (Mirandé, 1987, 2018; Urbina, 2012; Urbina & Alvarez, Urbina & Álverez, 2015). The targeting based on the label of "gangs" has allowed a wider number of individuals who had no gang involvement to be stopped, searched, and scrutinized (Durán, 2013; Huerta & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Rios, 2017).

Survey research on middle school and high school students capture a greater proportion of Latinas/os, African Americans, and males self-reporting gang membership, but more commonly at one, two, or three times greater than Whites, and in some instances, race and ethnicity along with gender were found to be only weakly associated with gang membership (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Estrada, Gilreath, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2013, 2014; Melde, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2009; Winfree, Bernat, & Esbensen, 2001). For example, Esbensen and Winfree (1998) surveyed 5,935 eighth-grade students in 42 schools located in 11 cities across the nation. In their survey, Whites accounted for 40% of the respondents and 25% of the self-reported gang members. Hispanics were 19% of the total sample and 25% of the self-reported gang members. African Americans made up 27% of sample and 31% of self-reported gang members. Females made up 52% of sample and 38% of self-reported gang members. Esbensen and Deschenes (1998) found Whites and Blacks had higher proportion of male gang members, whereas there were a greater proportion of Hispanic females (28.4%) self-reporting gang involvement compared to Hispanic males (22.9%). Estrada et al. (2014) surveyed 272,863 high school students in California. Nearly 49% of the respondents were Latino, 44.2% White, and 6.6% Black. In terms of self-reported gang membership, 58.4% were Latino, 31.3% White, and 10.3% Black. Regarding gender, 47.8% of the respondents were male and 52.2% female. In terms of self-reported gang membership, 61.7% were male and 38.3% were female. Proportionally, 10.7% of all males and 5.9% of all females considered themselves to be gang involved as did 13.2% of Black students, 9.8% of Latino students, and 5.7% of White students. In summary, these various studies found female self-reported gang membership ranged from 38% to 43% with a prevalence rate from 3% to 8%, whereas males self-reported gang membership ranged from 56% to 62% with a prevalence rate of eight to 14%. As a range, 25% to 31% of Whites self-reported gang involvement.

In addition to these rates, several studies found youth who self-reported gang involvement also self-reported a slightly higher proportion of living in single parent homes and having fathers or families without a high school education compared to nongang youth. One study found gang members were less integrated into societal institutions and felt less good about themselves and confident in their academic abilities (Dukes et al., 1997). Understanding the survey data can be enhanced by incorporating several qualitative studies focusing on Latino youth experiences in school (Flores, 2016b; Huerta & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Portillos, González, & Peguero, 2012; Rios, 2017). A common theme across these studies is that Latino/a youth often feel criminalized due to perceptions on the part of teachers, police officers, and others that Latino/a youth are involved in gangs. Thus, friends can create shared meanings based upon perceptions of belonging, but school officials and authority figures can use perceived identities to implement greater oversight and punishment.

2.3 | Behavior and activities: Bonding, sticking together, and survival

The primary activity for most gang members is boredom and socializing with an occasional conflict with rival groups or individuals. Several researchers have found it ironic how one of the reasons youth report joining a gang is to escape boredom but often are still bored even after becoming a gang member. Indeed, Malcolm Klein (1995, p. 11) has often been quoted for the following statement regarding his early research on gangs in Los Angeles involving thousands of hours of contact with gang members and outreach workers:

> For the most part, gang members do very little—sleep, get up late, hang around, brag a lot, eat again, drink, hang around some more. It's a boring life; the only thing that is equally boring is being a researcher watching gang members.

Several additional researchers have supported the view of how most of the time gang members are simply "kicking back" and trying to find something to do with their time (Vigil, 1988, 2007; Ward, 2013). These findings capture how many gang members report challenges dropping out or being pushed out of schools and struggling to find employment, which can reduce opportunities for entertainment or increased social networks. Although there is an interest in partying, sex, drugs, music, and action, these activities are often in short supply. The intertwining of action with occasional acts of violence increased chances for incarceration, death, and/or disability.

Nevertheless, a primary focus of most gang research is on how gangs amplify delinquent and criminal offending. Many gang researchers support the claim that the relationship between gang involvement, criminal behavior, and violence is so well established that it could be considered "one of the most robust and consistent observations in criminological research" (Thornberry, 1998, p. 147). This belief has become so strong that even a large portion of researchers (i.e., the Eurogang program) have begun using *illegal* activities to define which groups are gangs compared to other social groups (Klein & Maxson, 2006); however, determining whether the gang itself causes increased offending requires additional scrutiny. Peterson and Krivo's (2010) study of 87 cities nationwide found disadvantaged communities accounted for a significant proportion of violent crime; however, these researchers were surprised by lower levels of violence in Latino neighborhoods despite "above average disadvantage." To help explain some of these results, Ramiro Martinez (2015) reported how immigration reduced violent offending. According to Martinez (2015), Latino communities are on average more likely to have violent crime than White neighborhoods, but immigration and greater access to at least some form of a segmented labor markets are associated with lowered rates of violence below what is experienced in Black neighborhoods.

Estrada et al. (2013, 2014) surveys with middle school and high school students in California found gang membership was not directly associated with violence perpetration or victimization. Students who had risky peers and engaged in behaviors that include truancy and substance use were more likely to be involved as perpetrators of school violence. These researchers encouraged school officials to focus more on risk behaviors and attitudes as opposed to gang membership per se. Despite a lack of actual violence in schools, there was still a perception of possible victimization from peers. Several researchers have found that youth who fear being victimized join gangs, which ironically increases the likelihood that they will be victimized (Melde et al., 2009). The authors of this study speculated that youth were not allowed to show fear in a culture steeped in violence. Studies have emphasized how violence and victimization also occurs at the hands of the state. For example, officer-involved shootings have a significant impact on the Latina/o community (Durán, 2016, 2020). In some communities, the number of fatal police shootings are comparable to the number of homicides resulting from gang violence (Durán, 2018).

In general, survey research of middle school students found Latino youth who self-report gang involvement also self-report greater involvement in delinquency. However, criminologists G. David Curry and Irving Spergel's (Curry & Spergel, 1992) research in Chicago with sixth to eighth graders found higher reports of substance abuse among Hispanic youth compared to property crime or school discipline problems, whereas African American males had higher rates of delinquency. Curry (2000) matched these self-reports with records from the Chicago Police Department

wherein he confirmed a greater proportion of African American youth had delinquency offenses on their records compared to Latino youth. In his study, African American youth were 1.885 times more likely to be arrested for delinquency as any Latino youth. In addition, 48.7% of youth who reported some level of gang involvement in the survey were never identified as delinquent by the police department. Curry and Spergel (1988) analyzed census tracts and found Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics lived in distinct social worlds, like the findings reported by Peterson and Krivo (2010). Gang problems were concentrated in low-income, public housing projects and in poor Black and Hispanic low-income sections of the city. In terms of gender, girls self-reported committing the same variety of offenses as the boys but at a slightly lower frequency (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). Girls self-reported greater parental monitoring and school commitment (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998), but lower self-esteem and greater social isolation (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999). Joan Moore's (1991) extensive collaborative research in Los Angeles determined women were more likely to come from troubled homes compared to men. The hyper-surveillance of Latinas and the gang label continued to follow young women in schools and the juvenile justice system (Flores, 2016b; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Pasko & Lopez, 2018).

Ethnographic studies support a view that certain individuals within a gang are more involved in illicit activity than others. James Diego Vigil (1988) stated the level of commitment to the gang can be regular, peripheral, temporary, or situational. Regular gang members join at an earlier age (i.e., 10–14) and leave the gang at a later age (22+). There were also different types of gangs as outlined by Sociologist Avelardo Valdez (2007). In the city of San Antonio, his team of researchers found 26 active Mexican American gangs and two adult prison gangs. These groups were placed in the following typology: barrio-territorial, criminal adult dependent, criminal non-adult dependent, and transitional. The most common were the barrio-territorial gangs (12 of the 26 gangs studied). This supported a viewpoint that the level of gang organization determined what type of activities are expected of members. For example, criminal-adult-dependent gangs were more involved in illegal activities. Drug abuse has been reported to be higher for gang youth compared to nongang youth including the use of substances such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and even more serious drugs such as heroin (Hoffman, Weathers, & Sanders, 2013; Mata, Valdez, Alvarado, Cepeda, & Cervantes, 2003; Moore, 1978, 1991; Valdez, 2007). There is some support for gangs organized around the distribution of drugs (Hagedorn, 2015; Padilla, 1992; Valdez, 2007), whereas other studies have primarily focused on individuals within the gang utilizing drug networks to make more money but not necessarily to the benefit of the entire group (Brotherton, 1996; Durán, 2010).

2.4 | Leaving gangs: Redemption, punishment, and decolonization

Longitudinal studies have found that gang membership is often a temporary aspect of life (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). Different life stages bring changes in networks and trajectories. An increasing number of studies have investigated what happens to gang members after they no longer maintain an active role (Flores, 2009, 2018; Moore, 1978, 1991). The amplified levels of offending and victimization during gang membership decrease once someone stops playing an active role in the gang (Moore, 1978, 1991; Vigil, 2007); however, societal challenges remain. Departing from an active role in the gang does not create better access to jobs, increased education, improved treatment from law enforcement, the criminal justice system, or even necessarily from previous rival gang members (Durán, 2013, 2018). Moreover, the impact of various forms of social control including policing, the courts, mass incarceration, and deportation on the lives of many young men and women have only enhanced the level of obstacles placed on families (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Flores, 2018; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Vigil, 2007).

Sociologist Edward Flores studied two organizations (Homeboy Industries and Victory Outreach), which have facilitated the recovery of gang members by incorporating ritualized forms of communication to promote positive ideals of abstaining from drug use, earning legitimate wages, and rebuilding fractured family relationships (Flores, 2009, 2016a; Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Individuals in these gang-recovery programs (i.e., Homeboy Industries and Victory Outreach) use talk to further distance themselves from their deviant-labeled lifestyles and by

aligning themselves with conventional expressions of masculinity, such as responsible fatherhood. At Homeboy Industries, gang members rearticulate notions of Chicano masculinity as a fractured component in their life by expressing the need to be a "family man." Similarly, Victory Outreach helps members reposition their life through sermons and rituals that situated religion as a form of control that had a mediating effect on gang life. Additionally, Flores argues that American-origin religious institutions provide shelter against downward mobility through "religious optimism" (Flores, 2009). Consequently, the effects that religion has on gang life serve to distance beliefs and attitudes of active gang membership as deranged behavior and a path towards exiting the gang. To create change, the leaders of these groups often talk disparagingly about their previous lifestyle and various debilitating outcomes such as tattoos, criminal records, alcohol and drug dependencies, and disabilities that continued to remain difficult obstacles to overcome. Sociologist Melissa Guzman (2019) described a faith-based organization that encouraged individuals to move from criminal, gang, or deviant lifestyles resulted in members existing in a state of spiritual debt. Members working to change lifestyles were required to undergo racialized discourses of depravity that involved making themselves into public spectacles by providing testimony about previous wrongs and providing higher levels of service compared to other members in order to receive acceptance. Moreover, such a system required more from female members compared to male members.

Most gang programs, although open to both males and females, are geared more towards males. Thus, as research has found, there exists qualitative differences for females regarding why they join, their behavior in the group, and so too has research sought to determine whether girls and young women leave gangs for different reasons. For example, the impact of motherhood forces "homegirls" to reconsider their position in the gang. Sociologist Moore and Hagedorn (1996) found Mexican American female gang members experience of motherhood as a life-changing event with the understanding that having a child brings new responsibilities, and the cultural expectations require them to adopt the role of good mothers. As a result, motherhood serves as a pathway for gang girls to mature out of the gang and an opportunity to enter traditional family roles. Sociologist Katherine Maldonado's (2018) personal experience and *testimonios* with young mothers and gang-involved females highlights the role of child protective services and being seen as a dangerous and neglectful mother. These stories highlight young women's desire to go back to school and continue their education, serve as good mothers, but also deal with the negative lifestyles of victimization, abuse, and trauma that began in childhood homes and continued into personal domestic relationships. A study of 118 self-identified female gang members in San Francisco, California of whom 47% of the sample were Latina, 29% Black, 9% Filipino, and 9% Asian found motherhood transformed their lives in positive ways (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2005). The authors reported that contrary to the stigmatized identity of teenage mothers, young women in stressful social environments have the ability for self-empowerment and desire for new opportunities for themselves and their children. Additional research studies have supported the finding of fatherhood also serving as a transformative experience; however, most children continued to be raised by mothers due in part to the father's incarceration, deportation, serious drug use, or death (Durán, 2018; Lopez, 2017; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009; Moore, 1991).

Leaving gang life, or even shedding the gang member label proves to be difficult, especially after serving time in jail or prison. Newly released inmates encounter difficulty gaining employment, forming families, or reconnecting with partners and children who have become older. The longstanding effects of mass incarceration follows gang members throughout their entire lives. Once released, most gang members attempt to live conventional lifestyles by working regular jobs and starting families, but the prospects in an economically and racially stratified society make it increasingly difficult to completely escape previous identities or criminal justice sanctions (Durán, 2013; Flores, 2018; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Moore, 1978, 1991; Weide, 2015).

Although Pentecostal conversion, job skills, and the responsibility of parenthood provide gang-involved Latinas/os an opportunity to transition away from gang activities, several studies have emphasized the role of civil rights-based social movements and how they have worked to improve living conditions, access to employment and education, along with greater political inclusion (Durán, 2013; Montejano, 2010; Moore, 1978; Padilla, 1992; Vigil, 1999). Unfortunately, most of these success stories were from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Current efforts by active

and former gang members to transform gangs and the social conditions have required new strategies where the punishment of the state has become more enhanced (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Durán, 2013; Flood, 2003; Flores, 2018).

3 | CONCLUSION

The literature on Latinas/os, gangs, and settler colonialism highlights three patterns. First, Latinas/os experience a second-class status in the United States as by the economically poorer and resource-deprived communities within which many Latinas/os continue to live (Dohan, 2003; Durán, 2013, 2018; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Peterson & Krivo, 2010). Peterson and Krivo (2010) described Latino neighborhoods as "above-average disadvantage." Along the U.S.–Mexico border, these rural and urban areas were considered the poorest region of the country (Durán, 2018). A small portion of Latino youth growing up in under-resourced communities have formed groups or gangs primarily for self-protection. Settler colonialism emphasizes power differences in society that have privileged White settlers and dispossessed indigenous and Latina/o residents from land as well as an opportunity to use these resources for wealth accumulation (Barrera, 1979; Gómez, 2007; Murguía, 1975; Navarro, 2005). Peterson and Krivo (2010) characterized White neighborhoods as "very low disadvantage." Most White youth have been able to rely upon traditional institutions such as family, religion, schools, and law enforcement to reduce peer victimization, and they do not receive efforts for removal by the state.

Second, despite conditions that increase the formation of gangs and gang membership, most Latinas/os (89–90%) *do not* join gangs. Based on middle school and high school self-reports, there were a proportion of males and females who belong to gangs. In terms of gender balance, these numbers are around 60% male and 40% female (Estrada et al., 2013, 2014). Thus, it is inaccurate that only male youth join or belong to gangs. Understanding these social groups requires an examination beyond traditional forms of masculinity. The reasons youth join gangs range from self-protection, belonging, making friends, boredom, and attempts to retain a nonassimilated identity (Lopez & Brummett, 2003; Padilla, 1992; Vigil, 1988). Although law enforcement agencies perceive a greater proportion of Latino gang involvement compared to other racial and ethnic groups, the survey does not appear to interview primarily White police officers as towards why they hold these views (National Gang Center). There have been several research studies outlining the over-labeling of Latina/o youth as gang members by authority figures in communities, schools, and prisons, which indicate perceptions not matching reality (Durán, 2013, 2018; Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Rios, 2017). In terms of settler colonialism, this point essentially questions the concept of a gang, the loss of culture and identity that occurs in the process of assimilation, and the differential treatment of White segregated spaces and behaviors.[5] There are White social groups and there are White social groups engaging in criminality and violence that often do not receive a similar level of scrutiny or enhanced levels of punishment.[6]

Third, geographic spaces and individual lives shaped by inequality and discrimination are often associated with increased substance abuse, peer conflict, and strategies for obtaining income from underground networks. Although most gang activities were devoted towards socializing with family members and friends and striving to reduce boredom, there were instances where individual and group conflict resulted in levels of social harm that impact Latina/o residents and the constant interplay of not being a victim or offender. Growing up in unequal social environments increases the presence of gangs and some family members and friends who join at some point during their lives. Although rates of homicide in the United States are lower than in African American communities, the same cannot be said globally for Latin American countries (Correa-Cabrera, 2017; Durán, 2018; Gundur, 2019; Martinez, 2015). Self-destruction and violence hurts entire communities. In a settler colonial society, genocide can operate by creating the conditions and allowing for the self-destruction of indigenous groups. Marginalized groups who cannot be eliminated experience deportation and criminalization. Thus, it is empowering to read various strategies utilized by oppressed communities and groups to resist state destruction. Moving away from problematic social groups can serve as a source of strength when channeled into social help groups, religion, and politics; however, in a settler

colonial society, assimilation cannot be the only way to resist. Decolonization requires various forms of activism and social movements to produce different structures in settler colonial societies (Montejano, 2010; Navarro, 2005; Vigil, 1999).

Based on the information presented in this review, there are important reasons for incorporating the theoretical framework of settler colonialism to understand gangs (Glenn, 2015; Hernández, 2017; Wolfe, 2006). Gangs highlight the lack of inclusion for Latinas/os in the United States society and how these social groups can bring both harm and empowerment. Victimization of the Latina/o community is occurring not only from rival gang members, fellow gang members, or self-harm, but the experiences with state violence.[7] The impact of aggressive policing, mass imprisonment, the criminalization of immigration, and the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border continues to present a heightened crisis. As settler colonialism was geared towards elimination of indigenous people, Latinas/os who are both old and new encounter a challenge of not quite receiving the status of a racial minority yet experience various patterns of second-class treatment geared towards elimination. The reasons for the formation of gangs and the White institutional response continues to be a contested topic as towards how to provide solutions when such a goal of improving the Latina/o experience is not inherently in a settler colonial states' best interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] There exists a wide range of scholarly literature outlining the historical identities of residents who identify as Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Hispano, Spanish American, Mexican American, and Indohispano. For the purposes of this article, my goal will be to combine these groups under the pan-ethnic term of "Latina/o." In working to preserve these identities, we have sought to use the terms used by the original authors. In addition, Latinx is an increasingly developing term to provide greater inclusion, but it too encounters obstacles as outlined in the special issue in *Latino Studies* 2018, 16. As most gang studies were highly heteronormative the x will not be used except as a point for future research.

[2] A chapter focusing on the public response to Latinas/os and the topic of gangs is currently under production for an edited book.

[3] There were several additional countries below 3%, and for greater insight, please consult the citation.

[4] Historian James Cockcroft (1986) wrote a book titled *Outlaws in the Promised Land: Mexican Immigrant Workers and the Promised Land* wherein he argued how undocumented Mexicans laborers exist outside of constitutional legal protection and thus are essentially outlaws. Some Chicana/o scholars may argue due to the gringo injustice, this experience has carried over toward Latinas/os in general.

[5] Bonilla-Silva is one of the small number of scholars who critiqued the harm caused to Whites by living in White segregated spaces.

[6] For a quick overview, review the literature on school shootings, police shootings, domestic terrorism, lone wolf terrorism, white collar-crime, green crime, and state violence. In the future, I'd be more than happy to write such a *Sociology Compass* article.

[7] Several themes deserve greater attention than this article was able to provide on the topic of prison gangs, motorcycle clubs, and adult organized crime groups. In addition, the impact of immigration and deportation to and from Latin America that has made it possible for some gangs to exist on a transnational level. An additional theme of complexity was how sexual orientation can complicate traditional notions of street gangs and masculinity or femininity.

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