# INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL GANG LIVES

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*My name is Darwin; I'm sixteen years old. I grew up in a poor neighbourhood, with lots of crime, violence and drugs. My mother brought me up all by herself; life was hard, and we were poor – I was always saying to her, 'mum, I'm hungry, mum, I'm hungry' … When I was eight years old, I joined the local gang, and I became a delinquent. I got my first gun when I was thirteen. One day, a few months ago, my* bróderes *(brothers) from the gang said to me, 'come on, let's go, woo, woo, let's go and attack the gang in the Dieciocho de Mayo neighbourhood!' So off we went, and we caught one of them, and started roughing him up. '*Oye, *calm down,* majes *(guys), I've got nothing to do with anything', he said to us. 'Yeah, sure', I replied, 'I've seen you with them, you're one of them, you're one of the Dieciocho de Mayo gang, you* hijuéputa *(son of a bitch)'. So I started hitting him, real hard, but he got away, and ran to the park where the other Dieciocho de Mayo gang members were hanging out, and we began to shoot at each other. Bam, bam, this way, bam, bam, that way, bam, bam, everywhere! And then the Dieciocho de Mayo guys shot this woman passing by, selling tortillas, by mistake. 'Let's get the fuck out of here', one of my* bróderes *said to me, 'come on, let's go, they killed that woman, the Police is going to come'. 'No, no', I said to him, 'let's kill those shameless* hijuéputas, *can't you see, they can't even shoot straight!' Bam, bam, we kept on shooting, bam, bam, here, bam, bam, there, but then they got La Juana. They fucking killed him – can you believe it? He was my friend, he died in my arms, my shirt was full of blood … We got the fuck out of there, but a few days later, I went back by myself, to get revenge. I saw one of the Dieciocho de Mayo guys, a fucker called Mongo, sitting on a sidewalk, smoking a joint. He didn't notice me as I got right up behind him, and then shot him in the neck – bam! – and he died there and then, face down in the street … I got the fuck out straight away but somebody saw me and I was denounced to the Police, and they came looking for me, so I've had to go into hiding. That's why I'm here now. But whoever denounced me had better watch out, because I'm a dangerous guy. My* bróderes *and I, we're going to get even, we're going to fucking blow away those treacherous cock-sucking* hijuéputas, *make them vomit blood until they understand that we're the ones in charge around here!*

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The above monologue is from an interview that I carried out with 'Darwin' – this name is a pseudonym, for obvious reasons – in November 2009 in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,[1] a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, in Central America, where I have been carrying out research on gang dynamics since the mid-1990s. I was introduced to Darwin by a couple of local gang members I knew, who excitedly presented him as a gangster who was 'on the run'. I was naturally intrigued, and so I asked Darwin whether he was willing to tell me his story. Although initially reluctant to be interviewed he ended up accepting after the local *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members – most of whom I had interviewed previously for my research – vouched for me.

Darwin proved to be a vividly dramatic raconteur. At the same time, however, he clearly also lied and exaggerated repeatedly about his life as a gang member throughout our interview. I subsequently discovered that La Juana was in fact alive and well, that the murder that Darwin claimed to have committed never actually happened, and that rather than hiding from the Police, he had been sent to live with his grandmother in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández following the death of his father, and his mother's ensuing emigration to the United States in order to find work to provide for Darwin and his siblings. Although by all accounts he *had* been a gang member in his old neighbourhood, Darwin later admitted to me that he was never involved in anything other than low-level instances of crime and violence – petty theft, small-time muggings, opportunistic burglaries, as well as minor gang fights – that the most potent weapon he had ever wielded was a machete, and he had never killed anybody.

This was by no means surprising, as Darwin's real-life gangster experiences very much mirrored those of the majority of Nicaraguan gang members at the time.[2] He had clearly constructed his narrative around stereotypical tropes widely associated with gangs and gangsters in both the Nicaraguan and more global public imagination – namely that the gangs are inherently conflictual and violent organizations whose members are cruel, cold-blooded, vindictive individuals – likely in order to seem more exciting and interesting. Certainly, such representations of gangs and gang members are arguably what make them both fascinating and repulsive in equal measure. But they are also extremely misleading, as this volume highlights by presenting the life histories of thirteen gangsters from twelve different countries around the world.

These were collected in the context of the GANGS project, a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant-funded programme of research that I directed at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, between 2019 and 2024.[3] This brought together an international network of forty-nine researchers from around the world to study the global comparative dynamics of 'gangs, gangsters, and ganglands'.[4] The project drew on a variety of methodological approaches, including collaborative and transnational ethnography in five different cities – Managua, Cape Town, Marseille, Naples and

Algeciras – across five countries – Nicaragua, South Africa, France, Italy, Spain – as well as the collection of thirty-one life histories of gang members or individuals closely associated with gang members from twenty-three different countries.[5] The thirteen presented in this volume specifically focus on the motivations and processes through which individuals join and leave a gang, how gang membership unfolds, the long-term consequences of having been a gang member, as well as post-gang trajectories.[6]

Part of the originality of the GANGS project lies in the fact that comparative research is relatively rare within gang studies. Certainly, the overwhelming majority of investigations have focused on a single gang or location, whether intra-nationally (see Durán 2013: 9–10, on the United States) or internationally (see Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 8–11). This lack of comparative research is partly due to the widespread sense of 'American exceptionalism' that exists within mainstream gang research, well-illustrated by the eminent US criminologist Malcolm Klein's emphatic declaration that 'the street gang is basically an American product' (cited in Hazelhurst and Hazelhurst 1998: 3; see also Klein 1995). This has clearly hampered comparative endeavours in the past, both within US gang research, which has generally tended to ignore the non-US literature, and globally, insofar as non-US gang research has tended to assume that there is little cross-cultural correspondence with US gangs, and generally does not engage with US gang literature except conceptually, generally with a limited number of classics such as those written by Frederic Thrasher (1927), William Foote Whyte (1943) or Philippe Bourgois (1995), for example, despite the fact that the literature focused on the US iteration of the phenomenon constitutes unquestionably the most extensive and developed corpus of gang research (see Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004; Mohammed and Mucchielli 2007).

Admittedly, there exist a handful of volumes that can be said to offer something of an implicit comparative perspective by virtue of juxtaposing case studies of gangs from different countries, including most notably those by Kayleen Hazelhurst and Cameron Hazelhurst (1998), John Hagedorn (2008) or Jennifer Hazen and Dennis Rodgers (2014).[7] But none of these properly offer any form of direct or systematic comparison. There have, however, been two other large-scale comparative research initiatives focusing on international gang dynamics besides the GANGS project. On the one hand, the Eurogang project,[8] which has been ongoing since 1998, and which has been iteratively seeking to develop a framework for comparing US and European gangs on the basis of annual workshops that bring together an evolving network of researchers based in the United States and Europe (see Klein *et al.* 2001; Decker and Weerman 2005; Esbensen and Weerman 2005; Klein *et al.* 2006; van Gemert *et al.* 2008; Esbensen and Maxson 2012; Maxson and Esbensen 2016; Melde and Weerman 2020). On the other hand, the ERC-funded TRANSGANG project,[9] led by Carles Feixa at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain, between 2018 and 2023, which developed multi-sited, transnational ethnographic research to explore how Latino and Arab gangs could act as local agents of social mediation – as well as the

political and institutional barriers to such attempts – both in their homelands and within migrant communities abroad.

Both the Eurogang and the TRANSGANG project have drawn on gangster life histories in their research – indeed, they have been a particularly important element of the TRANSGANG project (see Feixa and Andrade 2020; Feixa 2021; Oliver 2023) – but neither of them has sought to compare these, whether intra- or internationally, generally considering them in a stand-alone manner. Indeed, comparing life histories is another key experimental innovation of the GANGS project, and to this extent, this volume is quite different to the overwhelming majority of previously published gangster life histories, which have tended to be monographs or articles focused on a single individual. Although unquestionably insightful, these inherently run the risk of showing those individuals only as 'one thing, in one way, over and over again', as the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie put it in her famous 2009 TED talk on 'The danger of a single story'.[10]

Even if a singular story can be very powerful, it arguably always gains in currency if it is contextualized in relation to other stories, as it is this that allows us to distinguish between its idiosyncratic aspects and its more general and generalizable elements, thereby enabling broader insights and inferences. This was explicitly one of the reasons why Oscar Lewis (1964) wrote up his famous life history of Pedro Martínez, a Mexican peasant whose life spanned the Mexican revolution and its institutionalization, drawing not only on Pedro Martínez's voice, but also those of his wife Esperanza and their son Felipe. Similarly, Patrick Naef (2025: 5) argues in relation to his research on the everyday nature of 'criminal governance' in Medellín, Colombia, which he explores through the trajectories of three young men whose lives are deeply but differently intertwined with the criminal group controlling their neighbourhood, that 'pluralism offers a pathway to gain a more comprehensive understanding of such contexts'.

This is very much what this volume seeks to do in bringing together the thirteen different gangster life histories presented here. At the same time, the aim is not to compare them directly. In line with the enormous variability and contested nature of gangs and gangsters, GANGS project participants adopted a 'fuzzy' definition of what constitutes a gang member, each drawing on locally contextualized and vernacular understandings rather than any putatively universal definition. Moreover, each life history presented in this volume should be seen as exemplifying – rather than representing – a particular gang trajectory, and makes no claim to being typical. This means that there is little use in trying to measure or tally specific empirical similarities or differences between the life histories. Each one represents a unique experience that cannot necessarily be fitted into a typology or analysed in relation to a fixed, cross-cutting hypothesis. Rather, the volume adopts what Sian Lazar (2012: 352) has called a 'disjunctive comparative approach', aiming 'to set different iterations of a phenomena alongside [each other to] see what [might] come … out of an examination of their similarities and differences'. Approached in this way, what each life history does when juxtaposed with other life histories is challenge certain assumptions, raise new questions, or potentially

problematize conventional thinking, thereby potentially generating new ways of seeing gangs and gangsters. The aim, in other words, is not to identify common patterns or trends, but rather for each life history to bring to the fore a range of more general issues about gang lives.

This is not to say that there are no common threads connecting the different life histories presented in the volume, however. Methodologically, all of the chapter authors, with one exception, have or had long-term, multi-year relationships with the individuals whose personal narratives they collected on the basis of multiple interviews carried out several years apart.[11] Indeed, in some cases – Atreyee Sen and Ram (Chapter 2), José Luis Rocha and Bryan (Chapter 8) or David Brotherton and King Tone (Chapter 11) – this relationship and their interviewing stretch or stretched out over the course of multiple decades.[12] This means that the life histories presented in this volume are doubly longitudinal in nature, both intrinsically, due to their inherent focus on trajectory, but also because they all draw on empirical material collected at two – and in many cases, more – moments in time. A majority of the life histories presented here have also been crafted in a proactively dialogical manner, in conversation with the individuals whom they are about, who have approved them, and are actively looking forward to seeing them in print, something that differs significantly from the way that many past life histories were produced.[13]

The life histories presented in this volume can also be said to collectively make a number of general conceptual contributions, including, for example, confirming the variability of gangs and gangsters around the world, whether with regard to their shape and size; their criminal, delinquent and violent activities; their relationship with other social actors including the state and other criminal groups; as well as the potential determinants and consequences of being a gang member. In particular, they highlight the contingent nature of the turning points that can shape individual lives, both generally and in relation to specific issues such as going to prison, migrating or suffering trauma, for example, as well as how different configurations and relations can potentially come to the fore to construct a gang member's life trajectory, thereby illustrating the fundamental embeddedness of gangs as social phenomena, and how this can condition both individual and collective trajectories. The life histories are also extremely insightful with respect to understanding the long-term consequences of having been a gang member, and more specifically, the basis upon which sustainable post-gang trajectories can potentially be constructed.

Empirically, this volume also makes an important contribution to broadening the scope of gang research beyond North American and European contexts.[14] Although two of the life histories are from the United States and two more from Italy and the UK (Scotland), the others come from Bangladesh, Belize, China (Hong Kong), Guatemala, Honduras, India, Kenya, Nicaragua and Sierra Leone, countries that are not the 'usual suspects' when it comes to gang research. Indeed, in some cases, the life histories presented in this volume are, to the best of my knowledge, the first to ever be published of gang members from these countries. This 'Southern' empirical dimension also significantly adds to the

more conceptual insights that can be gleaned from the volume contributions. In particular, some of the common issues and factors determining gangster trajectories that initially seem to come to the fore across different life histories can in fact often be seen as potentially leading to different outcomes in different contexts due to the cross-cultural variability of social processes. Or conversely, the juxtaposition of life histories from different contexts simultaneously also highlights certain commonalities that might be overlooked because they can take on fundamentally different forms in different cultural contexts, showcasing how these can consistently play a central role in shaping a gangster's life despite their institutional variances.

The rest of this introduction first considers the general global significance of gangs and gangsters, and what we can learn from them, before reviewing the relationship between gang research and the life history method, both past and present. It then offers a roadmap to reading this volume, highlighting both general insights and specific connections that might be learnt about the logics and experience of being a gangster. The stories presented in this volume are about lives that have been lived through violence, illegality and crime, but also familial love, friendship, addictions and ageing. As such, they offer insights into tragedy and loss, inclusion and belonging, departures and return, whether to gang cultures and identities, or to broader groups and communities – that is to say, basic forms of being human. They provide us with deep and intimate narratives that give voice to individuals who have had multiple encounters with gang worlds as insiders and outsiders, but who also live within a wider social world, thereby highlighting the universal experience that a gang life can be.

## *The global significance of gangs and gangsters*

As Frederic Thrasher (1927: 5) pointed out in his pioneering study of the phenomenon in 1920s Chicago, 'the gang is a protean manifestation: no two gangs are just alike; some are good; some are bad; and each has to be considered on its own merits'. Certainly, almost 100 years of gang research since Thrasher's foundational study have highlighted how gangs can vary enormously in form, dynamics and consequences. Some gangs are very ephemeral, while others are more durable, some are big, while others are small, some are more involved in crime, others less, some are more violent, some are territorial in nature, others are more networks, and so on. This variability makes precisely defining what constitutes a gang very difficult, despite the fact that a lot of this gang research has been characterized by 'a longstanding and largely technical debate on the proper definition of the street gang' (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003: 43). This has not generated any clear consensus, however, as beyond the fact that gangs can be said to be collective social forms whose members consider themselves to be an identifiable group and who are identified as a group, and who routinely engage in diverse instances of crime, delinquency and transgressive violence, both

individually and as a group – although it is also important to note that not all of the activities of gangs and gang members are criminal, delinquent or transgressive – there are few elements consistently associable with gangs across the world.

Gangs moreover also exist on a fluid institutional spectrum. As John Hagedorn (2008: xxv) has pointed out, ‘today’s youth gang might become a drug posse tomorrow, even transform into an ethnic militia or a vigilante group the next day’. For this reason, he sensibly suggested that ‘the best definition of gangs … is an amorphous one’ (Hagedorn 2008: 31), that is to say, one that accepts their variability, and does not try to pigeon-hole them too precisely (see also Rodgers and Hazen 2014: 8). This is all the more so the case considering that, in the same way that the development economist Hans Singer is once reported to have said that ‘an informal … enterprise is like a giraffe; it’s hard to describe but you know one when you see one’ (cited in Lubell 1991: 19), a gang is ultimately very much a commonsensical social phenomenon, albeit one that is generally locally situated and specific.

Similarly, even if some gang researchers have argued that gang members generally display particular personality traits, such as ‘psychopathic tendencies’ (Yablonsky 1963) or ‘defiant individualism’ (Sánchez Jankowski 1991), such analyses are in many ways rather self-serving, and no investigation has convincingly shown that gang members consistently correspond to any specific personality type (see Curry *et al.* 2014: 38–42). Certainly, for every gang member who might plausibly be categorized as a ‘psychopath’ or a ‘defiant individual’, there are more often than not at least an equal if not a greater number who do not display such personalities (and these are moreover personality types that can also characterize non-gang members, of course). To this extent, just as defining what constitutes a gang is complicated, so is distinguishing gang members, all the more so as they are never solely defined by their gangsterism.

At the same time, however, despite their variability, gangs and gang members are nevertheless recognizably global social phenomena, and their existence has been repeatedly noted across time and space all over the world (Rodgers and Hazen 2014). The historian Livy, for instance, famously commented on the political role played by gangs during the Roman Republic in his renowned history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*, while the medieval Arab geographer Ibn Khaldun described how gangs often conditioned the ordering of urban space in fourteenth-century North African cities in his celebrated geography of the world, the *Kitāb al-’Ibar*. Similarly, the history of the so-called ‘Wild West’ is frequently recounted through the trajectories of gangsters such as Jessie James, Billy the Kid, or Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (White 1981). Closer to the present, anthropological, criminological or sociological studies have noted the presence of gangs and gangsters in contexts as disparate as Belize (Baird 2024), China (Boretz 2011), the Congo (Gondola 2016), France (Lepoutre 1997), Guatemala (Levenson 2013), South Africa (Jensen 2008) or the United States (Brotherton and Barrios 2004), amongst others.

This omnipresence arguably makes gangs and gangsters potentially highly revealing institutions and individuals. Certainly, beyond their general association

with crime, delinquency or violence, they can often also be connected to a range of other fundamental human activities, such as the exercise of power (Stephenson 2015), capital accumulation (Padilla 1992), socialization (Mohammed 2011), identity formation (Feixa 1998), territorial control (Suttles 1968), resistance (Brotherton 2015), transnationalism (Lamotte 2022) or the articulation of gender relations (Hume 2007), for example. Indeed, these are often observable in a much more direct manner through the gang lens, as Thrasher (1927: 3) implicitly argued when he contended that gangs were '*life*, often rough and untamed, yet rich in elemental social processes significant to the student of society and human nature'.

More generally, Thrasher also pointed out that gangs are both autonomous social phenomena, with complex internal logics and dynamics, and epiphenomena, fundamentally reflecting – and shaped by – broader social structures. As a result, although his research offered extensive information about the minutiae of '1,313' gangs in Chicago,[15] it was not 'just' a study of Chicagoan gangs, but also shed light on the broader political economy of the city and early twentieth century America, including in particular in relation to issues of migration, ethnicity, discrimination and race relations, as these were reflected in the actions of gangs and their members. Gangs and gangsters, in other words, were 'bellwether' phenomena for Thrasher, their emergence and particular evolution over time reflections of the changing nature of early twentieth-century American society. This more general perspective that gangs and gang members provide on the world is what makes them so important to study and understand.

## *Gang research and the life history method*

According to Greg Dimitriadis (2006: 351), Thrasher's study of gangs in 1920s Chicago was the first systematic social scientific study of the phenomenon, and partly because of this, it remains 'without question the starting point for gang research'. Thrasher drew on seven years of multi-method primary research carried out between 1919 and 1926, a major element of which was the collection of gangster life histories, that is to say, personal narratives about an individual's life trajectory.[16] These, Thrasher (1931: 253) contended, 'reveal[ed] useful information concerning at least three important aspects of delinquent conduct: (1) the point of view of the delinquent; (2) the social and cultural situation to which the delinquent is responsive; and (3) the sequence of past experiences and situations in the life of the delinquent'. The monograph based on his research, *The Gang*, is consequently peppered with numerous extracts from what Thrasher referred to as 'gang boys' own stories', to illustrate not just how and why individuals joined and left gangs, but also to show how broader structural processes such as racial and ethnic discrimination cohered and intersected to produce specific lived outcomes and experiences, as well as how gang members – both as individuals and as members of a particular social group, that is, a gang – understood and interpreted these experiences.

Thrasher was not the first gang researcher to draw on life histories. They constituted the empirical basis of several early studies of gangs, including, for example, Clarence Rooks' (1899) *The Hooligan Nights*, which detailed the dynamics of late nineteenth-century London's underworld through a life history of 'Young Alf', or Joseph Adams Puffer's (1912) *The Boy and His Gang*, based on the life histories of 'sixty-six boys who were members of gangs' (Puffer 1912: iii). But the systematic institutionalization of life histories as a key method in gang research is very much associated with the so-called 'Chicago School of Sociology' (Bennett 1981), arguably the dominant school of socio-criminological thinking during the first half of the twentieth century, both in the United States and more globally (see Jones and Rodgers 2023). This particularly championed 'ideographic' research approaches (see Palmer 1928), including life histories, pioneered by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in their mammoth, five-volume landmark opus, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20),[17] and scholars associated with the Chicago School of Sociology drew – to a greater or lesser degree – on life histories in a series of now classic studies of crime and delinquency produced in the 1920s and 1930s. This included Thrasher's work, but also works by W. I. Thomas (1923), Clifford Shaw (1930, 1931), John Landesco (1933), Walter Reckless (1933), Ernest Sutherland (1937) or Clifford Shaw, Henry McKay and James McDonald (1938), for example.

Shaw and Sutherland's research, in particular, illustrates the multifaceted nature of the life history approach and the multiple advantages that this can procure very well. Shaw's *The Jack-Roller* (1930), for example, detailed the life history of a petty criminal called 'Stanley' – the name is a pseudonym – in exceptionally rich detail, often directly including unedited excerpts of Stanley's own writing, while at the same time relating the 'melodrama' of his life to broader environmental factors and the failings of the US juvenile justice system at the time (Salerno 2007: 143–58).[18] Similarly, in *Brothers in Crime*, Clifford Shaw *et al.* (1938: x) drew on the life histories of the five 'Martin' brothers to trace the contingent but often intergenerational transmission of criminal patterns of behaviour, as well as 'the relationship between delinquency and the culture conflicts which often confront the immigrant family in the physically deteriorated and socially disorganized communities in large American cities'. Commenting on the life history of Chic Conwell that he presented in *The Professional Thief*, Ernest Sutherland (1937: 229 & 231) for his part wrote that it showed 'how the culture of the underworld grows out of and is related to the general culture', but also that 'the professional thief is torn by conflicting tendencies; he is preying on society and at the same time is not happy as an enemy of society', suggesting that 'he started as an honest person' but then found himself 'enmeshed' in life's vicissitudes 'until he lost his integrity'.

As John Laub and Robert Sampson (2003: 58–9) have succinctly summarized, a life history approach has a whole range of advantages for the study of gangs, beyond those identified by Thrasher, Shaw or Sutherland:

> First, the life history method uniquely captures the process of both becoming involved in and disengaging from crime and other antisocial behavior. …

> Second, life histories can uncover complex patterns of continuity and change in individual behavior over time. … A third advantage is that life histories reveal the complexity of criminal behavior, … offer[ing] a way of breaking down complex phenomena by providing detailed information about events as they are experienced and the significance of these events for the actors involved. A fourth advantage is that life histories are grounded in social and historical context. … A fifth advantage is that the life-history method shows the human side of offenders.

In other words, the analytical power of life histories for gang research lies in their ability to simultaneously reflect both the uniqueness and the complexity, but also the variability, of the gang experience, in a way that foregrounds individual agency in a fundamentally contextualized manner. At the same time, life histories are also inherently humanizing from a representational perspective, partly because they are amongst the most relatable and empathetic means of depicting the human experience. They allow us to understand the motivations, the emotions, as well as both the banality and the exceptionality of events that shape an individual's choices and trajectories in ways that are eminently personal, and go beyond stereotypes, something that is particularly critical considering the frequently fraught politics of representation surrounding gangs and gang members.

Having said this, individual life histories also enable us to consider – and render more intelligible – complex processes and forces that go beyond the individual. As C. Wright Mills (1959: 6–7) famously wrote in *The Sociological Imagination*, 'no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography … has completed its intellectual journey', as it is only in 'the capacity … to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two' – that we can truly 'grasp what is going on in the world'. Obviously, an individual narrative never offers us unmediated insights. As Daniel James (1997: 36) highlighted in relation to his life history of the Argentinean political activist *Doña* María Roldán (James 2000),

> if oral testimony is indeed a window onto the subjective in history, the cultural, social, and ideological universe of historical actors, then it must be said that the view it affords is not a transparent one that simply reflects thoughts and feelings as they really were/are. At the very least the image is refracted, the glass of the window is unclear.

It is in this latter respect that gangster life histories are arguably especially insightful, insofar as they potentially offer a clearer image of things than other life histories. AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) notion of 'people as infrastructure' helps us to understand why this might be the case. This is an analytical concept that he developed in order to highlight how in many contexts – including in particular those where material circumstances are deficient and the state is not consistently the primary vector for social organization – specific categories of 'over-determined' individuals end up conditioning the 'modes of provisioning and articulation' that shape how local social orders come together (Simone 2004:

407 & 428). Gangsters are one example of such 'over-determined' individuals, by virtue of the fact that they frequently dominate their local communities – socially, economically and politically – and this makes their particular trajectories often especially revealing. In other words, their life histories provide us with what might be termed – following Wright Mills – a 'gangster imagination', through which to better understand not only gangs, crime or delinquency, but the world we live in more generally (see Rodgers 2025a).

At the same time, as Sidney Mintz (1979: 21–2) argued, writing about his classic life history of the Puerto Rican sugar cane worker *Don* Taso (Mintz 1960), any individual biography needs to be considered in a way that distinguishes between

> the personal, unique or idiosyncratic, on the one hand, and the culturally typical or normative on the other. … The goal of such an undertaking would not be to de-emphasize individual uniqueness or to eliminate the significance of personality in the study of change, but rather to specify … the way individuality plays itself out against terms set by socio-cultural forces.

To this extent, a life history – whether of a gangster or otherwise – should not be seen as 'representative' of any particular broader trends and processes, but rather as 'illustrative' of the way that these can play out, and how they can come together to shape a life. They concern potential and latency rather than typicality and manifestation. This is especially important considering that gang members are often sociologically exceptional, insofar as only a minority of individuals in any given context ever join a gang, and moreover most who do will also eventually leave the gang after a few years, as globally, the gangster status tends to be a finite one (see Covey 2003; Brotherton 2015).

## *Contemporary gangster life histories*

Despite their versatility and the multiple insights they can procure, the popularity of life histories – both methodologically and in terms of their perceived ontological and epistemological significance – has waxed and waned in socio-criminological research since the foundational Chicago School of Sociology studies in the 1920s and 1930s. Evolving academic fashion – including in particular the increased pre-eminence of quantitative approaches within mainstream social science – saw a decline in life history-based research on gangs, crime and delinquency in the post-Second World War period (Becker 1970; Bennett 1981; Goodson 2001).[19] There has however arguably been something of a revival of the life history approach within gang research over the course of the past thirty years or so, as is testified by the proliferation of studies such as those by Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle (1996), Ralph Cintron (1998), Mark Fleisher (2000), John Laub and Robert Sampson (2003), Dave Brotherton and Luis Barrios (2004), Jonny Steinberg (2004), Robert Gay (2005, 2015), Lamence

Madzou and Marie-Hélène Bacqué (2008), Timothy Black (2009), Frank van Gemert (2011), Dennis Rodgers (2016, 2023), Azzedine Grinbou and Michel Kokoreff (2019), Carles Feixa and César Andrade (2020) or Randol Contreras (2024), for example.[20]

A striking feature of this new wave of research drawing on gangster life histories is that its geographical scope is much more global than previous gang studies, most of which focused on the United States and Europe, with the odd exception, including, for example, Lois B. DeFleur (1970) on Argentina, Luis Salas (1979) on Cuba, Don Pinnock (1984) on South Africa or T. Wing Lo (1984) on China. This change mirrors a broader shift in gang research over the past quarter century – particularly pronounced in relation to studies based on ethnographic investigations (Decker 2019) – partly linked to the rise of the so-called 'Southern criminology' movement that has sought to incorporate perspectives and knowledge from the Global South in order to challenge the dominance of Northern theories in criminological research (Carrington *et al.* 2016). There has arguably been a dual rationale underpinning such an approach. On the one hand, a desire to address power imbalances in knowledge production and reproduction, and to emphasize the need for a 'decolonization' and 'democratization' of the concepts, theories and methods used to study and analyse gangs (see Atkinson-Sheppard *et al.* 2025). On the other hand, there has also been a call to empirically 'decentre' gang studies from the Global North (Jensen and Rodgers forthcoming), as well as to engage in more comparative research (Jensen and Rodgers 2024), including in particular South-North comparison (Jensen and Rodgers 2025).

Beyond this, however, contemporary gangster life histories have arguably not evolved very much compared to the past, whether from a methodological or epistemological perspective (see Rodgers 2025c). More than a hundred years after the publication of W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1918–20) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, in-depth, qualitative interviews are still the most common means through which gang researchers conduct life history research, and a life history is still generally written up by the researcher, according to the latter's particular intellectual agenda. Admittedly, writing styles have evolved a little, with contemporary gangster life histories frequently more 'literary' than those produced by Chicago School of Sociology scholars, including dialogue and 'thick' descriptions of gesture and body language, for example, and they often also explicitly integrate a greater awareness of researcher positionality and display more reflexivity than previous studies.[21] Of particular note in this latter regard is the autobiographical dimension that many contemporary researchers add to their gangster life histories. Robert Gay (2005, 2015), for example, includes himself significantly in the narratives that he has written about Lucia and Bruno, something that allows us to understand much better his relationships with them, how he elicited certain forms of information, as well as the particular agenda(s) that guided his writing of their life histories (see also Feixa and Andrade 2020, for an example of a life history co-written as a dialogue between a researcher and his gangster interlocutor).[22]

The integration of autobiographical material by researchers in contemporary gangster life histories can of course be linked to the post-modern turn in the social sciences, as well as post-colonial and ethical concerns about confronting privilege, positionality differences and power imbalances. But it is also arguably the result of what – following Mikael Bakhtin (1981) – might be termed a 'chronotopic' change in the nature of the relationship between many contemporary gang researchers and their gangster interlocutors. Whereas in the past, this was frequently temporally circumscribed – Thrasher, for example, completely cut off his ties with his Chicagoan research interlocutors after finishing his field research (see Rodgers forthcoming) – the lives of gang researchers and their gangster interlocutors now often become entangled over prolonged periods of time. This is something that has clearly been facilitated by the rise of social media and other enhanced, instantaneous and cheap forms of globalized communication and travel (see Rodgers 2019: 128),[23] but it has also meant that many – but not all – of the recent wave of gangster life histories are based on a much longer term and repeated engagement between the researcher and their gangster interlocutor(s) than was commonly the case in the past. Gay's regular, repeated interactions with Lucia began in 1986, and with Bruno in 1999, for example (see Gay 2019).[24]

Paradoxically, this new longitudinality has arguably led to an increased problematization of linearity in contemporary gangster life histories, which often focus more on discontinuities rather than continuities (see Rodgers 2021), within epistemological frameworks that either implicitly or explicitly recognize that, as Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002: 865) has highlighted, most lives – whether of gang members or otherwise – are 'negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence'. Contemporary gangster life histories consequently tend to avoid representing life trajectories as 'totalizing transformations' involving an inevitable progressive movement from one life stage to another, as was the case of *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw 1930), for example, which had a 'redemptive' narrative, its central protagonist, Stanley, 'mov[ing] through the darkness into the light', as Roger Salerno (2007: 157) has pointed out. Instead, contemporary gangster life histories effectively focus on understanding how trajectories are shaped by specific points of 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks 2002), that is to say, the moments when broader structures and processes impact particularly strongly on an individual's life course, when new opportunities appear, or when the possibilities for an individual's agency are enhanced, and which mark significant but generally contingent turning points. These do not necessarily line up in a linear manner, so to speak, and trajectories are characterized by crisis, interruptions, reversals, as well as advances, progress or achievements, as is particularly well illustrated by Lamence Madzou and Marie-Hélène Bacqué's (2008) co-written life history tracing the former's haphazard trajectory from gang member to drug dealer and professional carjacker to community worker while moving between Corbeil-Essonnes, Paris and Congo-Brazzaville, and having to contend with racism, financial hardship, war, police brutality and urban segregation. The life histories presented in this volume similarly illustrate the highly contingent nature of gang lives the world over.

## *How to read this book*

There are several ways to approach this volume. Firstly, simply as a collection of vividly written, real-life stories about individuals who have been or are associated with gangs in different parts of the world. The chapter authors have largely eschewed the dry and impersonal forms of writing that are all too often the hallmark of academic publications. Instead, they have sought to craft narratives that are poignant, evocative and intimate, that draw readers into the world of individuals who have frequently gone through more than most, foregrounding their voices, and allowing them to talk about and for themselves. Some of the lives described in this volume are stories of triumph, others of failure and yet more are simply tales of persistence and endurance in the face of difficult circumstances. They, however, all involve moments of joy and delight, anguish and grief, uncertainty and determination, fear and aspiration, or in other words, the whole gamut of emotions that characterize human life everywhere, thereby making them eminently and deeply relatable. As such, they call for and elicit understanding and empathy, and fundamentally humanize individuals who are all-too-often represented stereotypically in sensationalizing and pathologizing ways, not letting them disappear behind abstract categorizations and classifications. Each of the life histories presented in this volume is thus a unique narrative, and readers can choose to read all or some of them, according to their own personal interests and curiosity.

At the same time, however, even if the life histories all reflect a specific individual experience, as the poet William Blake (1988: 250) famously pointed out, 'general forms have their vitality in particulars; and every particular is a Man'. The life histories presented in this volume also highlight a range of more general issues about gangs and gangsters, including first and foremost confirming that these come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and that they can be involved in a wide range of criminal, delinquent and transgressively violent activities, from petty criminality to drug dealing to drug trafficking to racketeering to murder, amongst others. This diversity of activities is not necessarily remarkable considering the variability of gangs, and their specific manifestation in one context over another can often be associated to circumstantial differences that have been explored previously in the broader literature on gangs and crime, including the degree to which state authorities are present and how (see O'Donnell 1993), the geography of drug trafficking (see Arias and Grisaffi 2021) or the broader structure of labour markets and the lack of employment opportunities (see Bourgois 1995), amongst others. What is perhaps more surprising is the extent to which individuals can move between a whole range of seemingly unconnected criminal endeavours within a particular context. For example, Ram in India goes from being involved in drug running to conning tourists to cyber scamming in different locations across the country over the course of thirty years (Chapter 2). For his part, Kuch in Kenya becomes involved in a whole range of income-generating activities in the Mathare slum in Nairobi where he lives, some of which are legal, and some of

which not, combining these through a general 'hustling ethics' according to the opportunities that present themselves to him at different points in time (Chapter 6). This in many ways goes against the grain of many descriptions of gang members often being stuck in low-level, dead-end jobs, with few alternative opportunities (Bourgois 1995; Contreras 2013).

At the same time, some of the other life histories presented in this volume, including, for example, that of Shorty, a small-time marijuana-selling Belizan gang member (Chapter 5), suggest that a more circumscribed engagement in low-level criminal activities is also a possibility. This stands in stark contrast to a lot of the broader literature on gangs, which has highlighted how gang membership can be a potential pathway to involvement in organized crime. Certainly, this is what James Densley (2014: 517), for example, has argued in relation to British youth street gangs, contending that these can progressively transform into organized crime groups through a series of 'sequential actualization stages' (see also Butti *et al.* forthcoming, for a similar framework in relation to gangs in Colombia). Taken together, the life histories presented in this volume, however, suggest that this potential relationship is can be highly indeterminate. Although the case of Jennifer in Honduras, who 'graduated' from a local neighbourhood gang to a transnational *mara* (Chapter 3), shows that gang members can sometime move to becoming involved in organized crime, the life history of Danny in Glasgow suggests that this is far from inevitable, as his gang career remained strictly local, despite having periodic contact with individuals linked to more organized forms of criminality both during and after his time as a gang member (Chapter 7).

The difference between Jennifer and Danny's trajectories does not necessarily have anything to do with the transnational nature of the second gang that Jennifer joined, as the case of Rebel, a Salvadorean member of the transnational *Barrio 18* gang who emigrated to Italy highlights well, insofar as his transgressive activities in Italy were not in any way defined by the (putative) transnationalism of the *Barrio 18* gang but remained very local in scope (Chapter 4). The same is also true of Shorty, despite his trajectory having arguably been fundamentally conditioned by his multiple experiences of deportation from the United States to Belize, and gang membership in both places. What all these examples highlight is how gangs and gangsterism are fundamentally embedded social phenomena, deeply shaped and influenced by contextual factors.

Broader structures also explain why Jennifer's life history is the only one presented in this volume of a female gang member. Although female gang members are by no means unknown, they are unquestionably less common than male gang members. This however has little to do with any putative hormonal or physical differences, as altogether too many have disingenuously argued – for a critique, see Campbell (1984) – and everything to do with the existence of hegemonic forms of *machismo*, patriarchy and other kinds of gendered inequality, insofar as these socialize both men and women into particular roles and attitudes, and also condition gang dynamics (Hume 2007; Baird 2015).

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that human lives are always constituted dialectically, constantly balancing the tension that inherently exists between making personal choices and wider structural constraints. Certainly, a whole range of broader contextual factors come to the fore across the life histories presented in this volume as contributing to individuals joining gangs, such as impoverishment, lack of opportunities or discrimination, for example. Indeed, these are all issues that are frequently mentioned in the broader gang literature as frequently promoting gang membership (for critical overviews, see Brotherton 2015; Fraser 2017; Brotherton and Gude 2022). Yet when one considers that in any given context, it is only a small minority of individuals who ever join a gang, this clearly means that structural factors by themselves can only ever be one part of the explanation for gang membership rather than an inevitable cause. Not surprisingly, then, the life histories presented here, while bringing to the fore a diversity of contextual factors affecting individuals' trajectories, all also highlight how their influence is by no means deterministic. The fact that not everyone in Ram's community of origin in West Bengal is pushed into a life of crime, despite generalized poverty, illustrates this well, for example. Conversely, it is notable that Danny joined a gang after moving into a newly built post-war housing scheme in suburban Easterhouse from a dilapidated tenement flat in impoverished inner-city Glasgow. And Jennifer's life history of course intrinsically goes against the grain of the notion that broader hegemonic forms of *machismo* and patriarchy mean that female gang members do not become leaders or key figures in the gang (see also Rodgers 2024b).

It is arguably in the tension between individual agency and structural constraints that the vital conjunctures – that is to say the turning points – that shape gang lives emerge. This is something that can perhaps be seen most clearly in the way that the life histories presented in this volume are not just conditioned by the fact that individuals belong to a gang or engage in criminal activity. The life of Shorty, for example, showcases how his gangster experiences are fundamentally embedded within a broader family and community life that does not necessarily centrally turn around crime and delinquency, with his low-level drug dealing, in particular, clearly less important to him than his role as a carer and informal local social worker. Similarly, Sharif's time in a Bangladeshi street gang actually turned much more around his search for his family and surviving in a time of chaos and insecurity than any criminal or delinquent motivations (Chapter 10). Indeed, one of the most striking elements that cuts across all of the life histories presented here is how so many of the moments of vital conjuncture that characterize individuals' trajectories are associated less with their experiences as gangsters, and more with love and intimacy, something that is frequently overlooked when thinking about gangs and gangsters (see Jensen and Rodgers 2022), partly due to the way that they are represented in stereotypical and de-humanizing ways, but also because they tend to be reduced solely to their gangster condition. One of the major reasons why Bryan left the gang in Nicaragua was that he married a social psychologist working for the NGO that sought to offer him alternative opportunities (Chapter 8). Triad member 'HT' in Hong Kong similarly decided

to leave his gang life and drug addiction behind for love (Chapter 9). Even in the most unlikely of circumstances, such as the case of Chepas, an incarcerated member of the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang in Guatemala, who will likely spend the rest of his life in prison, the primary motivation driving his decisions and actions emerge as being his partner and child (Chapter 1).

The important role that imprisonment can play in shaping a gang member's trajectory is another cross-cutting issue that emerges from several of the life histories presented in this volume. This is by no means surprising; incarceration is considered a major factor determining gang members' life trajectories in the broader gang literature (e.g. see Miravalle 2022, as well as, more broadly, Stuit *et al.* 2024). But the life histories presented here illustrate how it can do so in a range of different ways. For example, in the case of Chepas, it has clearly institutionalized his gang membership. Indeed, in many ways, this negative impact of prison on his life has arguably been intergenerational, as his father's imprisonment shaped Chepas' youth and choices, something all the more poignant considering how his relationship with his own son is now being fundamentally conditioned by Chepas' long-term imprisonment. On the other hand, the prison experience of Rebel in Italy has been very different, insofar as carceral rehabilitation programmes that he was able to access in Italian prisons provided him with the means to complete his high school education and to viably enter the labour market, both of which clearly contributed significantly to his no longer being an active gang member.

Rebel's experience of prison is in many ways similar to that of 'HT' in Hong Kong, who learnt how to cook working in the prison kitchen while serving a seven-year sentence for manslaughter, something that enabled him to enter the labour market after being released, but who also stressed how his time in prison led to a process of self-reflection that led to him becoming deeply religious, something that has ultimately been important in shaping his post-gang trajectory as he has become an evangelical pastor. There are also analogies here with the prison experience of Antonio Fernández, a.k.a. 'King Tone', in the United States, insofar as he also underwent a profound process of self-reflection during the thirteen years of his incarceration, which led to him becoming a community and gang outreach activist (Chapter 10). To this extent, it is important to understand not just the fact of imprisonment, but also the broader carceral regime and the specific individual experience of imprisonment, as it is only by taking these into account together that we can understand how imprisonment can be either a negative or a positive vital conjuncture. At the same time, the life trajectories of Chepas, Rebel, HT or King Tone are all very contingent and situated in different ways, and even if they can be seen as sharing a particular vital conjuncture, this does not occur at the same moment in their respective trajectories, and does not necessarily have the same consequences over the long term. They are illustrative of possibilities rather than representative of certainties.

The same is true of the long-term consequences of having been a gang member, as well as post-gang trajectories. In this respect, the life histories presented in this volume can be divided into two halves. The first six focus particularly on life in the

gang, principally illustrating how and why individuals joined gangs and how their gang career has unfolded, with most of them still currently gang members. The last six life histories focus more on post-gang trajectories, and involve individuals who have left their gang. The post-gang trajectories of gang members are an important but frequently overlooked issue. Globally, most individuals who join gangs leave them and integrate mainstream society. This is talked about in the broader gang literature in terms of 'desistance', but the way this happens is not well understood. This is partly because desistance is frequently considered as an event rather than a process, as Géraldine Bugnon (2020: 227) has pointed out in relation to her research on youth desistance from crime in Brazil. To a certain extent this is arguably due to the fact that methodologically most studies of gangs and gang members are synchronic rather than diachronic in nature, that is to say, they offer a perspective on gang dynamics at only one moment in time (Cruz and Rosen 2020). Few studies have systematically explored the lives of former gang members *after* they have left the gang – an important exception is the longitudinal study by Laub and Sampson (2003) – yet it is arguably precisely this that is needed to understand how and why desistance might (or might not) occur.

In this regard, my own research on gang dynamics in Nicaragua, based on longitudinal ethnographic research over the course of thirty years in the poor, urban neighbourhood *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in Managua, the capital city, has included regularly interviewing and following the lives of a (purposefully constituted) sample of twenty local gang members. This has highlighted how individuals' motivations for leaving the gang have always been highly personal, idiosyncratic and contingent on opportunities (see Rodgers 2023). Those reported to me include – in no particular order – having children, marriage, experiencing a violent trauma (e.g. being severely injured), being imprisoned, becoming bored, having a lucky escape, being forced to join the army, emigrating, a death in their family, moving away from the neighbourhood, having a friend killed in front of them, parental pressure, evangelical religious conversion, being betrayed by other gang members, the kindness of strangers and finding steady employment.[25] Some of these have been more common than others at different points in time as a result of broader contextual circumstances, including the degree of violence associated with different local gang iterations at different points in time, and the variable risk that gang membership consequently entailed, or the wider state of the Nicaraguan economy and levels of unemployment, for example. Beyond the influence of such very general factors, however, I have not identified any issues consistently contributing to individuals' motivation for desisting. Moreover, none of these factors or events necessarily lead to desistance, as different individuals can experience them differently; this has been particularly true in relation to violent trauma, with some gang members shrugging off events that deeply shocked others, and vice versa. Ultimately, the specific motivation for desistance seems to be something very individual, dependent on a person's particular experiential understanding and interpretation of things, and contingent.

This is also what emerges from the life histories presented in this volume, which showcase similarly diverse – although sometimes quite similar – reasons

for desisting from the gang to those that I have encountered during my research in Nicaragua. For example, for Gaz, a gang member in Sierra Leone (Chapter 12), it was a combination of his sister dying, becoming bored, and his discovery of poetry that led him to leave his gang, while for Danny in Glasgow it was a mixture of getting married, finding employment and moving away from the Easterhouse housing estate where his gang was territorially located. The latter's life history also highlights how the consequences of having been a gang member do not necessarily have a negative impact over the long term, as the gang literature often suggests is the case. Indeed, Danny's post-gang life comes across as remarkably mainstream, whether in terms of his values or his work and family life more generally.

At the same time, however, the other life histories in the second part of this volume also highlight how the gang experience can actually offer critical elements for the construction of sustainable post-gang livelihoods, something that also goes against the grain of much of the gang literature, which often suggests that successful desistance involves completely leaving the gang life behind and reinventing oneself (for a review, see Carson and Vecchio 2015). The most obvious counter-example to this is perhaps King Tone in New York, who became a successful gang outreach activist partly on the back of having been a leader of the *Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation* (ALKQN) gang, something that not only gives him intimate knowledge about (some) gang dynamics, but also makes him a 'credible messenger'. Similarly, HT in Hong Kong became an evangelical pastor specifically ministering to Triad members and ex-members who have fallen into addiction, directly drawing on his own comparable experiences. The same is true of Sharif in Bangladesh, who has become one of the country's leading human rights activists specialized in the rights of street children, a topic he understands intimately as a result of his own time in the streets. The remarkable post-gang trajectory of Gaz in Sierra Leone has involved his first becoming 'The Paper Poet', writing 'street poetry' about his gangster life, before turning to collective farming with other former gangsters.

When seen from this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that many former gang members remain nostalgic about their past, including most prominently Rebel and Kuch, but also Danny, even if his past gang membership does not seem to have particularly impacted on his present. At the same time, that past can also catch up with you, even when it seems to be a potential benefit, as happened to Bryan, who left his gang to become a social worker with an NGO working to rehabilitate gang members, and in the course of doing so, began to collaborate with the Police as a local 'peace leader'. He was, however, drawn back into violence by wider political developments in Nicaragua, and more specifically the 'gangsterization' of the current authoritarian regime, which, following a failed popular uprising in April 2018, now uses an army of Police-deputized former gang members to brutally repress dissent and political opposition (see Rocha *et al.* 2023). Bryan's story is a reminder that being associated with a gang remains something extremely dangerous, something that the last life history of this volume, that of Sito (Chapter 13), also highlights particularly poignantly, insofar as it is not a life history per se, but rather the story of a life tragically interrupted, and the wide-

ranging consequences that this has had on Sito's family and friends. As such, Sito's death reminds us that a life history – whether that of a gang member or otherwise – always has a constructed narrative arc, one that is often implicitly redemptive and tends towards a happy ending, while in the real world, lives are all too often extremely fragile and contingent – and those of gang members particularly so.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Javier Auyero, Adam Baird, Alistair Fraser, Atreyee Sen, Ellen Van Damme and two anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback on draft versions of this introduction. Any infelicities remain my own.

## Notes

1 This name is a pseudonym.
2 See Rodgers (2024a) for an overview of the different phases of Nicaraguan gangsterism over the past thirty years, and the waxing and waning of levels of violence associated with the phenomenon.
3 'Gangs, Gangsters, and Ganglands: Towards a Global Comparative Ethnography', funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant no. 787935).
4 For further details, see https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards.
5 Argentina, Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Russia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, the UK, the United States and Venezuela.
6 Eleven other life histories collected for the GANGS project explicitly sought to experiment with new methodological and representational approaches to both collecting and writing a gangster life history, and have been published in a special issue of the journal *Critical Criminology* (Rodgers 2025c). A further four specifically explored the epiphenomenal qualities of life histories, drawing on individual trajectories as a means to get to grips with broader geopolitical trends, and have been published as a special thematic section of the journal *International Sociology* (Rodgers 2025b). Two more life histories are being published in a forthcoming monograph (Jensen and Rodgers forthcoming), and the final one has been published on a stand-alone basis (Rodgers 2024b). In addition, a series of abridged life histories have also been published online in *The Conversation* – see https://theconversation.com/gangsstories-a-glimpse-of-hard-lives-around-the-world-227166.
7 There are also similar volumes offering a more focused regional perspective, in particular in relation to Central and Latin America, such as the landmark trilogy by ERIC *et al.* (2001, 2004a, b), as well as Jones and Rodgers (2009).
8 See also https://eurogangproject.com/.
9 See https://www.upf.edu/web/transgang.

10 See https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

11 The exception is Paolo Grassi's life history of Rebel (Chapter 4), whom he only met with twice over the course of a few months in 2021 for reasons that he explains in his chapter. Grassi, however, has a deep familiarity with Rebel's Central American context of origin, as well as Milan, where Rebel now lives and where they met, having carried out long-term ethnographic research in both locations (Grassi 2018, 2024).

12 In addition, it should be noted that while Alistair Fraser and Angela Bartie's personal relationship with their interlocutor Danny (Chapter 7) dates back to 2011, they also had access to the transcript of an interview that he carried out with other researchers in 1969, meaning that their chapter effectively – and rather uniquely – offers a longitudinal perspective over the course of more than five decades.

13 Certainly, this is the accusation that W. A. Marianne Boelen (1992) made in relation to William Foote Whyte's classic life history of 'Doc', which he collected in relation to the research that became *Street Corner Society* (1943). She claimed that the latter was unaware that his life history would constitute a central element of the former's research, and that moreover he did not approve of the way he was represented once he was able to read the monograph. Whyte (1993) strongly rebutted her accusations, but part of Boelen's more general point was that there is often an inherent power imbalance in the way that life histories have traditionally been put together, with the researcher almost always having more control over the narrative they craft than their research interlocutor.

14 This broadening of the scope of gang research is very much a growing trend. Although some edited collections or overview volumes published in the past often included a token chapter or small section about gangs in the Global South (e.g. Decker and Pyrooz 2015; Mohammed and Mucchielli 2007; Sanders 2017), more recent publications of this kind are increasingly intrinsically offering a broader global coverage, including, for example, those by Brotherton and Gude (2022), Bucerius *et al.* (2022), Pyrooz *et al.* (2024) and Carson *et al.* (forthcoming).

15 No more than 400 different gangs are actually named in Thrasher's study, with detailed information offered about substantially less, although four tables in the book offer non-specific, tabular information about the age, race and nationality, size and delinquent activities of respectively 1,213, 880, 895 and 1,313 gangs (Thrasher 1927: 74, 191, 319 & 386). According to Mary Dodge and Gilbert Geis (2003: 375), 'Solomon Kobrin, who worked for years with Chicago gangs, contended that it was Thrasher's research assistants who had specified the total [of 1,313] as an in-joke, and that it was the house number of a nearby brothel.'

16 There exists some terminological confusion with regard to what constitutes a life history. Certainly, the expression is often used interchangeably with other descriptors such as 'life story', 'oral history', 'personal narrative', 'testimony', 'biography' or 'a life course approach', amongst others. This proliferation of terms partly stems from the fact that life history research has developed across a variety of disciplines, all of which have different vernaculars, and different expressions also place emphasis on different aspects of the endeavour. In the context of the present discussion, a 'life history' is taken to be an individual's personal narrative about their life course, generally collected through an in-depth interview or series of interviews carried out by a researcher, sometimes supplemented with autobiographical material written by the interviewee. This empirical narrative can be written up in a range of

different ways – Ken Plummer (2001: 396–9), for example, distinguishes between the linear 'naturalistic life history', the more focused or thematic 'researched life history', and the more personally 'reflexive and recursive life history' – but according to Carles Feixa (2018: 55, my translation), *the* key distinguishing characteristic of life histories compared to other oral empirical sources is that they 'are not given, but constructed, that is to say, they are actively elaborated through interactive processes that imply a dialectical relationship between different social agents, states of being, and forms of representation: informant-researcher, oral-written, narration-action, synchronicity-diachronicity, memory-history, etc'.

17 Volume 3, in particular, offered, according to Martin Bulmer (1984: 54), 'the first systematically collected sociological life history', that of a Polish migrant to the United States called Władek Wiszniewski.

18 It should be noted that there is significant controversy surrounding the extent to which Shaw downplayed or ignored certain elements of Stanley's narrative in order to 'craft' a narrative that fit his scholarly agenda (see Gelsthorpe 2007; Salerno 2017; Snodgrass 1982).

19 Important – albeit isolated – exceptions include Joan Moore (1978), Jon Snodgrass (1982), Anne Campbell (1984), John Hagedorn (1988) and James Diego Vigil (1988). It should be noted that life histories remained important more broadly within certain social science disciplines, including in particular in anthropology, as is well exemplified by the popularity of studies based on life history research such as those by Sidney Mintz (1960), Oscar Lewis (1961, 1964), James Freeman (1979) or Marjorie Shostak (1981), amongst others.

20 Not all of these studies qualify themselves as being life history-based, but use analogous terms such as 'ethnographic', 'biographical', 'narrative' or 'life' to describe the interviews that constitute their principal empirical basis. In all cases, however, individual narratives are the central element of the research.

21 A major exception in this regard is William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, originally published in 1943, which while not directly linked to the Chicago School of Sociology studies, was quasi-contemporaneous and published by the University of Chicago Press. It drew significantly on life histories, including in particular that of 'Doc', and included what is still one of the most detailed and illuminating reflexive methodological appendices in its 2nd edition published in 1955 (subsequently expanding this even further in the 3rd and 4th editions, respectively, published in 1981 and 1993).

22 Loraine Gelsthorpe (2007: 516) has argued that because this kind of autobiographical reflexivity is missing in Clifford Shaw's (1931) *The Jack-Roller*, the narrative of which she contends was fundamentally shaped by Shaw's personal biography, we cannot 'be really sure where Shaw's own story ends and Stanley's begins'.

23 Indeed, as Yvonna Lincoln and Michael Lanford (2018: 464) have pointed out, 'new technologies, particularly the rise of social media and the shifting social relationships such technologies have engendered' could very likely lead to the emergence of a variety of new methodological and representational approaches to life history research in the future.

24 There are some past exceptions, of course. Clifford Shaw's (1930: 1) research relationship with Stanley that produced *The Jack-Roller* was, for example, based on contact 'over a period of six years', and they continued to engage with each other socially until Shaw's death in 1955 (Snodgrass 1982).

25 Dying could of course also be added to this list, with the gang in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández suffering a variable annual death rate over the past two decades, from 4 per cent per year in the mid-1990s to up to 10 per cent in the early 2000s. Having said this, dying is obviously a means of leaving the gang that is significantly different to those listed above, particularly with regards to its ramifications for having a post-desistance trajectory.

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**Figure 1.1** 'Prison Time', by William Curiel, a.k.a. '*Chepas*', 2012.

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