

## Gangs Recruit a New “Blessed-In” Generation from the Cradle

By Maria Castro

Though her keys were still in the apartment door, Juanita could hear her baby crying from the hallway. She frowned and sucked her teeth. By the time she got in, placed the groceries inside the refrigerator and realized she forgot the milk, the baby was hysterical.

“Shut up! I am coming,” she screamed and scooted to pick up the infant girl from the crib. Juanita’s mother emerged from another room, and scowled: “You know? You have to learn to be a better parent. I’m out.”

Juanita looked at her as she left the apartment, smiled and cooed to the baby in her arms: “No one else is going to take better care of you *mi reina* (my queen). This is pure ‘Queen Love’.”

This was not just baby talk. Her words were far beyond mere allegory or metaphor, for Juanita and her child are building a genuine form of royalty --for a criminal line of succession in post-modern gang society.

Juanita, 19, is one of about 10,000 All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN) members living in New York City. The ALKQN is one of America’s oldest, largest and most organized street gangs with roots tracing to Chicago in the early 1940s. Nationwide, there are at least 50,000 Latin Kings and Queens, according to the latest statistics released by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators

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Association (NAGIA), which was founded in 1998 by criminal justice professionals to coordinate and promote anti-gang strategies.

Juanita's need for a group identity and a family structure, which elsewhere in society might be fulfilled by religion, patriotism, sports fandom or corporate loyalty, was satisfied by joining the Latin King and Queen Nation when she was only 13. She said she would do anything for them, including dying, to pass on the group's legacy to the next generation. Raising her 2-year-old daughter to be a proud Latin Queen is her duty now. "That is Queen Love! That's how it's supposed to be," she said, hitting her chest with her right fist and then extending her thumb, index and little fingers, clenching the ring finger and the middle finger – making the sign of a crown.

The Latin Kings and Queens live in a world full of symbolism, pride in heritage and ideals of their own. On special occasions, such as "Kings Holy Day," on January 6, and "Kings Week," during the first week in March, they all dress in white to openly practice a religion called "Kingism" in churches around the city. Kingism is their version of Catholicism, and Jesus Christ is the All Mighty King of Kings.

Latin Kings and Queens follow rules, which they call "the motherland manifesto and constitution" or simply "King Code." The King Manifesto is a declaration that offers pages of preaching about social justice, education, the lifting up of "Latin brothers and sisters," as they call each other, and unfailing loyalty to fellow Kings and Queens.

Juanita, who insists on being identified only by her middle name for fear of gang disciplinary retaliation, explained how their code of conduct limits indulgence in

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smoking marijuana and forbids the use of any other drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine. This catechism also punishes any member for “disrespecting” a fellow King or Queen or their immediate loved ones. The five commandments by which they live are: Love, Honor, Sacrifice, Obedience and Righteousness, according to statements from one of their most famous New York leaders, King Tone, who is now in prison.

If any member fails to follow the five commandments, or any other rules in the manifesto, they are punished with disciplinary measures that may range from suspensions from gang activities, expulsion, beatings by at least three other members, or even death.

Punishment, which the gang calls “violations,” can only be ordered by their chapter’s board leader or supreme board leader. They can be full body “violations” or only upper body “violations,” but faces must never be touched. “That’s disrespectful,” Juanita said. “Just as disrespectful as when someone lets our flag or crown touch the floor.”

One of Juanita’s friends, who identified herself as “La Chula,” said the Latin Queens and Kings are all brothers and sisters, but added that just as in any other family, discipline is sometimes necessary and situations can turn violent.

In 1993 for example, the founder and self-appointed leader of the New York State Chapter of the Latin Kings, Luis Felipe or “King Blood,” then serving a nine-year sentence in the Collins Correctional Facility in Helmuth, New York, for the death of a woman in 1981, wrote a letter to an inmate stating that “someone who had betrayed the Latin Kings deserved to die,” according to court papers. Luis Felipe was

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subsequently sentenced to life in prison for murder without the possibility of parole, and has been in solitary confinement since 1997.

Zulma Andino or “Queen Zulma,” who became the leader of the New York Chapter of Latin Queens in late 1993 and who has been serving an 18-year sentence for assault and drug-related crimes since 1997, ordered the beating of Annette Martinez for “falsely claiming to be a high-ranking leader of the Latin Queens,” according to court documents.

The three major chapters of the All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation are the original one in Chicago; the Connecticut chapter, which follows the “Chicago King Code” or “Chicago Style;” and the New York Chapter, which follows a slightly modified King Code.

Andrew M. Grascia, a nationally recognized criminal investigator and gang expert currently working as in the Westchester County District Attorney’s office, believes the New York Chapter is so different from the Chicago chapter that it is no longer accepted as part of the All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation by the Chicago supreme board.

In any chapter that follows the Chicago style, including Connecticut, no woman can sit on the supreme council. But New York’s chapter is equal opportunity. Some Latin Kings and Queens interviewed agreed there is at least one woman, Queen Luna, presently sitting in the New York supreme council.

Some of the most identifiable symbols used by the Latin Kings and Queens are: their official colors (black and gold/yellow); the letters LK, standing for Latin

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King, ALKN (All Mighty Latin King Nation), LKN (Latin King Nation), ALCN (All Mighty Latin Charter Nation), and ADR, which stands for *Amor De Rey/Reina*, or king/queen love in Spanish.

Most of them also wear necklaces made of yellow, black and white beads. Grascia said that some Latin Kings and Queens in New York may use red beaded necklaces to represent the blood they have shed in their search for “respect.”

Their hand sign, or crown gesture, is made by extending the index fingers, thumbs and little fingers of both hands, while the middle fingers and ring fingers are clenched -- then uniting both hands over their heart.

Carlos Rivera, a 23-year-old mechanic and Latin King from the Bronx who declined to disclose his gang alias, said only fully initiated members of the Latin Kings have the right to make this sign and salute as kings. He also explained that during chapter meetings, all Latin Kings and Queens must stand silently, making this sign throughout the meeting, like the pledge of allegiance hand-over-heart.

Their salute begins by hitting their chest with their right fist and immediately flashing their hand sign, meaning “King Love.”

Images of lions, the sun, a diamond, crosses, figures of a king’s head, five-pointed castles, the number five, and three or five-pointed crowns are often tattooed on the members’ bodies or painted on the streets as graffiti. The three-pointed crown is believed to be used by Kings and Queens of Puerto Rican origin, while the five-pointed crowns are used by members of Mexican origin or any other Hispanic members.

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Juanita is a true believer. She takes pride in her gang affiliation and she shows it by wearing their colors in her clothing and jewelry. She owns at least eight yellow shirts and six pairs of black pants. When she buys sweatpants in any store, she looks for black ones with yellow stripes on the sides.

Juanita is a single mother, as are many other Latin Queens. She is vague about the father of her child. She said he could be anybody, so she won't bother to look for him. All that matters to her is the fact that the father is a King and her child is a "genuine princess," she said.

Juanita lives in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the South Bronx with her mother, where the only things that are in abundance are drugs, old tennis shoes dangling from the telephone and utility wires over the street. Police patrols and domestic violence are commonplace. The cool water spouting from fire hydrants in a hot summer day provide welcome relief and diversion.

Although Juanita's mother plans to move back to Puerto Rico next year, and Juanita has no other relatives in New York, she is not worried. She said that ever since her initiation she can always count with what she calls her "real family: The Latin Queens."

"We are no gang," she said. "We are a family. We are all for one. We respect each other and we got each other's back from the moment we become Queens or Kings."

Juanita's initiation into the All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation is something she doesn't like to talk about. Pausing to breathe deep while sitting back

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and then letting out a sigh, she closed her big, brown eyes for a moment. Then, she pulled her long black curls into a pony tail and continued to nod her head in disapproval. “Don’t push it girl,” she said while taking a sip of her favorite drink, “morir soñando.”

“How I got in is not exactly accepted in our constitution,” she said. “Especially in the New York Chapter today, and though it still happens, it’s something no Queen is proud of doing and no King is going to be willing to talk about.”

She said she took the easy way in, which is to have sex with at least three members of the gang at once or with a leader because she knew no King or Queen who would speak on her behalf. This initiation is commonly known in the ALKQN world and in any other street gang as being “sexed-in.”

Law enforcement agents such as Inv. Grascia and other gang experts such as Lianne Archer, a Certified Social Worker who has been doing research in gangs for more than six years, agree there are two other ways to be initiated into a gang. The most common among men, and which is also becoming very popular among women, is known as “fight-in” or “jumped-in.” At least three chosen members of a gang will beat the candidate for initiation at least 30 seconds for the men, 15 seconds for the women.

The other initiation ritual is a high honor known as being “blessed-in.” Only gang family members or close friends who have proved loyal to a gang’s philosophy and code of conduct are eligible. Members’ children automatically become part of a

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gang the day they are born: this is also called being “blessed-in” or “born-in,” and this is how the “active mother” plays a crucial role for the gang’s next generation.

This trend is now becoming a big problem across America, according to gang experts. Stephen Cliffe, a middle school teacher from Rome, New York, who has been working with gang-affiliated teens for more than five years in state-funded programs, said this is perhaps the most important tool for gangs to spread their philosophy and recruit nowadays.

“We see a lot of the girls in the middle school who are pregnant or have children treating gangs as a viable life choice,” Cliffe said. “They even use their children as cover, according to their stories, to transport drugs, making deliveries in the strollers, crossing state borders.”

Lionel Reyes, a probation officer in Maricopa, Arizona, said he has seen many teenage mothers dress up their children in gangster apparel: “They put them in the baggy pants/bandana/shirt (gang colors), gun, bottle of booze. It’s normal for them. For whatever reason, the mothers of these children want to or like to emulate the gang life on the kids, even though many have lost family members to this lifestyle...

“The correct phrase,” he said “is ‘*Mi Vida Loca*’ or my crazy life. This is often seen in conjunction with the thespian masks and the phrase ‘smile now, cry later.’ Meaning, do the crimes now, cry about it in prison later.”

Police Officer Steven Schafer, who is part of the gang unit in the Indianapolis Police Department, said he knows many women nurturing their children to live the “crazy life,” but one stays in his mind:

“During one of our routine arrests, I remember our suspect’s wife telling their child never to feel ashamed for what they were and proudly proclaiming ‘I’m Sureños and I’ll raise my child to be a Sureño, too.’ It’s sad to think this child has no chance at a decent life,” he said. Sureños is the name of a Mexican gang based in Los Angeles.

Some of the gang members and former gang members interviewed, including Latin Kings and Queens, and members of the Crips, the Bloods, Mara Salvatrucha, Batos Locos, The Saint James Boys, Neta, Locas, and Cholos, agreed gangster lifestyle not only attracts them because it’s a “cool” way of life, but add that it is a survival tactic for most teens who live in poor neighborhoods.

“They don’t have a lot of choices,” said Sergio Argueta, president and founder of S.T.R.O.N.G, a non-profit organization that advocates for youth empowerment. “Most of these kids live in poverty and are used to violence since their early childhoods. They can’t think of alternatives, or college, when their only worry is surviving the streets of their neighborhoods.”

Iris Cordova, a Bronx resident and mother of three teenagers, believes more than poverty and rough childhoods influence teens to feel attracted toward gangster lifestyle. She also thinks pop culture plays a bigger role in gang recruitment.

“All those damn video games, like ‘Grand Theft Auto,’ the motion pictures glorifying gangsters and the hip-hop and rap music that’s played nowadays is losing our children,” Cordova said.

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Andrew Palmer, a gang specialist and executive director of Chain Breakers in West Virginia, agrees with Cordova.

“TV, movies, video games and music have desensitized our kids already to the point where they believe it is ‘cool’ to interact with the same behavior they are exposed to,” he said.

Palmer cites statistics that say that by the time a child reaches 12 years of age, they will have already witnessed at least 12,000 acts of violence and more than 6,000 murders on TV and movies.

‘Grand Theft Auto,’ one of America’s most popular video games, allows players to pick up prostitutes and beat and rob them for their money, run over pedestrians, kill cops and civilians, steal cars and simulate gang fights.

Gang investigator Grascia adds that video games are spreading the gang image further around America and across the rest of the world. “A child who might never be exposed to the gang world walks into a store and buys a game that has gang overtones like ‘Grand Theft Auto’ or ‘25 to Life,’ and now he/she is acting out gang hand signs and wearing the colors because he/she saw it on a video game,” said Grascia.

Grascia also said that gang members have even cited exposure to these video games as defense strategies in court cases.

Steve Nawojczyk, from the office of Mayor Patrick Hays in North Little Rock, Arkansas, remembers an interview he had with inner-city hardcore gang members once: “A 15-year-old girl rose to speak and said video games, movies and

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music won't make you violent unless your screws aren't in tight. Then she thought for a minute and said, 'and you know what? A lot of my friends' screws aren't in tight.' But the most compelling thing she said was 'and there is no one there to help them keep their screws in tight'."

Nawojczyk added that it's important to remember that most of these kids, or gang members, come from the "5H Club." "They are Helpless, Hopeless, Homeless, Hungry and Hugless."

The United States has at least 21,500 youth gangs with 731,500 gang members, a number that keeps rising, according to the 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment, produced by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Drug Intelligence Center and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Prison gangs, motorcycle gangs, and adult gangs are excluded from these estimates.

Estimates of the number of women involved in gangs vary. Some law enforcement agency statistics, for example, say 6 percent of gang members are women. But surveys conducted by school-based programs and community-based organizations usually show numbers ranging from 9 percent to 20 percent. Both sources agree that the number of women joining gangs and their participation in gang activities continue to grow more aggressively than figures for their male counterparts.

According to a report released by the U.S. Department of Justice, females constituted 13 percent of all juvenile arrests in 1967. That rate increased to 25 percent in 1996 and was up to 28 percent by 2000. While the juvenile male violent

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crime arrest rate increased 124 percent from 1967 to 1996, the juvenile female arrest rate more than tripled to 345 percent in the same period of time.

Although not all juvenile arrests are gang-related, Investigator Hector M. Alicea of the New York State Police Federal Gang Task Force believes that among women, at least 95 percent are gang related.

Some skeptics believe the number of women in gang membership is not increasing but claim their role has simply evolved to more visible activity. Juanita doesn't agree. She said she actually has seen how more and more young girls are getting involved.

"They just want to belong, and many of them are also bored. I mean, what are they going to do sitting home alone? Where nobody even asks you how school was?" she said.

Juanita also said that one of the reasons why more girls are attracted to gang activities may be the fact that women now can compete with their male counterparts for rank and popularity, at least in New York's ALKQN. "We are no longer just sex objects. You can tell by the way many girls are choosing to be initiated. With time, the guys have come to see that anything they can do, we can do just as well," she said. "We too deserve to be properly crowned."

Currently there are no reliable available figures on how many women are "jumped in" vs. "sexed in" or "blessed in." Richard Valdemar, a retired sergeant with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department said: "Many of these girls will deny they were

sexed-in, not only because today that is shameful, but also because they can be implicating their fellow gang members in crimes such as rape.”

Little field research has been done about women in gangs, according to the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association, so figures about women in gangs are sketchy.

In the 1940s and 50s, women were not even considered gang members. They were simply considered “groupies” or property of the male gang members. They were not allowed to join the men in their criminal activities. They were simply allowed to party and used for sexual purposes.

According to Pauline Jimenez and Janie Balderrama of the Houston Mayor’s anti-gang office, male gang members began accepting women more and more during the 1980s to increase their numbers and because they were considered less suspicious by the police. They became good assistants and accomplices in gang members’ crimes, mostly because police officers patrolling the streets are men and they are not allowed to search female gang members. Women began to be used as “mules” to carry drugs and weapons in case a police officer decided to search a suspect. Women have also been used as bait to set up rival gang members and gather information.

But in the past decade, according to information provided by anti-gang units from across the nation during the 2005 National Youth Gang Symposium, women in gangs fill all the following roles:

**“The Associate or Groupie,”** usually a girl who is easily influenced and is looking for fun, may openly show pride for her affiliation or “represent” the gang, as

gang members call it, and date gang members. These “Associates” are often sources of funds. Sometimes they have wealthy parents who give them money, cars and housing that they will later share with their fellow gang members. Other times, these girls are prostituted to raise money for the gang. They are not initiated.

“**The Active Sister**” usually gets involved to protect siblings and stays up to date on gang information. They are used to establish alibis, fight rival female gang members, may participate in gang activity and are expected to meet high expectations. They don’t necessarily have to be initiated. They are usually “blessed-in” because of their family bonds.

“**Party Girls/Sex Objects**” are associates or “sexed-in.” They carry/hide weapons for the members. They gather intelligence, set up rivals, hold or transport drugs and carry messages. They may be called hood rats, bitches, ho’s, or crash dummy.

“**The Girlfriend**” has an ambiguous role and enjoys limited respect from the male members in most gangs (in the Latin King and Queen Nation, however, “girlfriends” must be respected by all members as a sister or another Queen). This is a false sense of power; initiated female gang members give them no respect. Girlfriends may be associates, which are not initiated, or already gang members, who are legitimately respected.

“**The Gang Member**” is initiated by being “jumped-in” or by committing a crime on behalf of the gang. They are easily recognized as tomboys. They are

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heavily involved in gang activity, are loyal to the gang and are respected by males. They are leaders or recruiters.

“**The Wife**” is a companion. They cover for their husbands, take care of the children, and they are granted instant respect from the gang. Their gang activity is limited. They create balance and a sense of normalcy. Some of them may not agree with the husband’s affiliation and activity, yet they are usually loyal to the husband.

“**The Active Mother**” is the newest trend in women’s involvement, and one of the most important for the gang in terms of cultivating and nurturing their traditions. They have children and are willing to pass on the value system of the gang through them. They attempt to protect children from gang violence, so their involvement in crime is usually very limited. But they teach their children to be tough and to manipulate the abuse system followed in the gang.

Juanita intends to teach her daughter how to become a respected “Latin Queen” by following the gang’s constitution, and her ambition is to see her become a leader.

“She is already lucky,” Juanita said. “She’s been blessed-in. She won’t have to endure no 30 seconds of beating to get in and no King is going to touch her in order for her to belong, like in my case. All she’s got to do now is represent.”

Juanita was proclaimed a Queen after she decided to be sexed-in. She said it was the only way in for her.

“I didn’t know how to defend myself. I was tiny and real skinny at the time and I knew if I was jumped-in they were going to kill me. I was also too afraid to do

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anything on my own to show my loyalty. I was too young. But I wanted to be part of them so bad that one day I just walked up to a high ranking King and I asked for it.”

She said it was not rape because she was willing and it actually took a lot of persuasion for this leader to accept her proposal. She said that for almost five months she would walk past him at least a dozen times a day flashing him her legs and cleavage. “It was mad funny because at 13 I had really nothing to show. But I think what got him was when I would just keep staring at him while biting my lower lip and then smile at him and let my hair loose.”

Legally, her initiation constituted statutory rape since she was only 13 years old. Juanita admits she once hid drugs to protect her boyfriend at the time, and little by little she became more and more violent to gain acceptance and respect from the other Queens. “Once I knew how to fight, everything else became so easy,” she said.

It is very likely that Juanita’s daughter will have to prove herself by fighting and become involved in gang activities, including crimes, to be a worthy Queen, survive in their world, “represent” and be respected as her mother wishes.

Female gang members who are blessed-in have to prove themselves worthy of the blessing sooner or later. Those who are sexed-in are usually not seen as respected Queens. This is a trend not only in the All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation, but in most, if not all, other street gangs, said Dana Peterson, a professor of Criminal Justice at the University at Albany who has been researching girls and gangs since 1994.

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“I know it is a tough life,” Juanita said. “But look around. That’s all there is here.” Juanita explained how girls who are sexed-in, like she was, play the role of party-girls. “We are not forced,” she said. “Raping a Queen constitutes a violation to our constitution that must be punished. But given the nature of our initiation, we are expected to be willing.”

However, Juanita explained that when a Queen wants to be seen as more than a sexual object, she can always earn respect by becoming more involved in their activities or by sleeping with the leaders. “No one is going to disrespect a leader’s woman,” she said.

Angela L. Ware, former project director for the Comin’Up Gang Intervention Program for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Fort Worth, Texas, agrees with Juanita. She said when female gang members want to move up the ranks through sex, they can also do something even more frightening: “When a female gang-member accepts to have sex with a member with HIV/AIDS, she automatically moves into the highest ranks because she is proving she is willing to die for the gang.”

Ware has been working with gang members for more than 20 years -her son is a former gang member - and she believes changing these teens’ mind-set is a long and very difficult process. “They truly feel the gang is the family they may not have, and unfortunately counselors like me cannot tell them it’s bad to be part of a group. Because it’s not... It is the things they do that make it bad.”

That is the case with ALKQN. The New York State Police Federal Gang Task Force said in a report to the Office of Juvenile Justice that the criminal activities

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Latin Kings and Queens are involved with include murder, assault, narcotics trafficking, gun-running, credit card fraud, counterfeiting, vehicle theft and mortgage scams.

But it wasn't always like that. Julio Munoz, also known as the "Old Man," or "Supreme King of Kings," founded the All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation in 1942 to help and protect minority groups, mostly Puerto Ricans, who lived in poverty in Chicago.

The organization once was prestigious; city officials even allowed them to march as a recognized group at the annual Puerto Rican Day parade. But over time, and especially after the drug epidemic of the 1960s and 70s, the Latin Kings and Queens turned to crime and violence and became a feared organization.

Today, although many believe the New York Chapter of the All Mighty Latin King and Queen Nation is weak and struggling for unity, massive arrests of Latin Kings and Queens are still taking place in the New York City area. This past July, at least 22 Latin Kings were arrested for drug-related charges in Long Island in just one day.

It's a tough, violent world. That is why Juanita plans to teach her child how to defend and take care of herself as early as possible, how to lie to the police, and how to do anything necessary to protect what she sees as her family: The Latin Kings and Queens.

Juanita's child doesn't understand what goes on around her. She sits in her crib with her yellow and black rosary dangling around her neck, screaming for food

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and sucking on her fingers. Most of the time, she is just looking around, puzzled by the world that surrounds her, learning to appreciate and experience every sound, every color, every smell. At 2, she doesn't like anybody else but her mother carrying her, and Juanita feels proud of that.

“Isn't that good? The only one she's got to trust is me,” Juanita said. “She is going to do what I tell her to do. That's just the way life is, and she's got to be tough. She's got to be proud of who she is and where she comes from. She's got to learn. 'Cause once a Queen, always a Queen. And that's my word.”

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“The Saint James Boys”

Several can be found in Jerome Avenue and Kingsbridge (at the St. James Park, others can be found in Van Cortland Park in Riverdale on Sunday mornings playing soccer games)

“Los Cholos” and “Batos Locos”

Members of these two gangs are found in the Bronx’s “Little Italy,” Crotona Park and Kingsbridge.

“Latin Kings and Queens” and “Ñetas”

Most of the Latin Kings, Latin Queens and Ñetas interviewed were from Hunts Point, Harlem, Newark, New Jersey, and Tremont Avenue & 180<sup>th</sup> Street in the Bronx.

“Mara Salvatrucha” or “MS13”

Two former members of MS13 were present at the 2005 National Youth Gang Symposium and were interviewed there. However, MS13 members can be easily found in Long Island and Queens (at Flushing Meadow Park).

The Bloods and Crips

A couple of interviews with Bloods and Crips were facilitated by Det. Grascia and Lianne Archer, others were made in Mount Vernon and Yonkers.