Profiting from Pain: How the Commodification of Ex-Gang Identities Perpetuates Systemic Oppression

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of individuals identifying as ex-gang members or former gang members leveraging their experiences to build careers and profit in collaboration with probation, law enforcement, and non-profit organizations. It critiques the role of such actors in reinforcing the demonization and criminalization of marginalized communities under the guise of reform. By analyzing academic contributions, such as Victor Rios's career trajectory, and programs like *Project Aware*, it demonstrates how the non-profit industrial complex and law enforcement narratives perpetuate structural inequities. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, the paper interrogates the socio-economic motivations and systemic dynamics that sustain the labeling and commodification of gang culture for institutional and personal gain.

Introduction

The social construction of gang culture has long been central to criminological inquiry, shaped by law enforcement narratives and academic institutions that have historically framed gang involvement as deviant, criminal, and inherently threatening. This framing, as Moore and Stuart (2022) argue, has contributed to a cycle of stigmatization and systemic marginalization of racialized and economically disenfranchised communities. At the same time, the concept of gang culture is not a static reality but a malleable construct shaped by the interests of powerful institutions, including law enforcement, policymakers, and scholars (Wegerhoff, Dixon, & Ward, 2019).

Recent trends have seen the rise of individuals identifying as ex-gang members or former gang members who leverage their lived experiences to gain legitimacy and build careers in academia, non-profits, and consulting for probation and law enforcement agencies. These actors are often celebrated as credible messengers or gang experts, perceived as uniquely positioned to mediate between criminalized communities and the institutions that oversee them. However, as Rising (2024) points out, this practice frequently commodifies the "former gang member" identity, transforming it into a profitable asset while doing little to address the systemic issues that underlie gang involvement.

While these individuals position themselves as advocates for change, their integration into institutions like law enforcement often reinforces the very structures of control and criminalization they claim to challenge. Victor Rios, for instance, has utilized his personal

narrative as a former gang-affiliated youth to build a successful academic career, advancing scholarship on structural violence and criminalized youth. Yet his work, like many in this domain, risks perpetuating the commodification of gang identities without fostering significant structural change (Brotherton, 2008). Programs like *Project Aware* and other initiatives in the non-profit industrial complex similarly operate within frameworks that prioritize profit and systemic stability over the empowerment of marginalized communities.

The involvement of these "insider" voices often bolsters the legitimacy of punitive and surveillance-based interventions, further entrenching the stigmatization of marginalized groups. Moore and Stuart (2024) contend that such collaborations not only fail to disrupt entrenched patterns of criminalization but also reinforce them by perpetuating narrow, deficit-based understandings of gang culture. This paper seeks to critically examine these dynamics, highlighting the intersections of individual careerism, institutional interests, and systemic inequities. By interrogating the roles of ex-gang members within these systems, it challenges the broader socio-economic structures that commodify lived experiences while maintaining the narratives that justify their control and exploitation.

Moreover, the analysis draws attention to how the broader non-profit industrial complex profits from the continued criminalization of cultural and racialized identities under the guise of rehabilitation. As Brotherton (2008) emphasizes, any meaningful critique of these systems must address the structural roots of gang involvement rather than focusing solely on individual or community-level interventions. By situating this critique within the framework of contemporary criminological research, this paper explores the ways in which ex-gang members, academic institutions, and non-profits collaboratively contribute to the perpetuation of systemic inequalities while cloaked in the language of reform.

Theoretical Foundations and the Commodification of Lived Experience

The emergence of ex-gang identities as a form of marketable expertise reflects broader trends in the commodification of lived experience, particularly within the academic, non-profit, and law enforcement sectors. As Wegerhoff, Dixon, and Ward (2019) observe, the conceptualization of gangs is increasingly instrumentalized, functioning as a malleable label that serves institutional interests rather than addressing the root causes of systemic inequality. This construction allows systems of power to benefit from narratives of reform while sidestepping the broader structural issues that perpetuate marginalization, such as poverty, racial inequity, and systemic disenfranchisement.

The commodification of lived experience is particularly evident in the valorization of the "ex-gang member" identity, which is marketed as an authentic and credible voice within criminological discourse. Rising (2024) critiques this trend, emphasizing how law enforcement and research sectors deploy the gang label not as a means of promoting social justice but as a mechanism to generate financial gain. This practice often reduces complex social identities to simplified tropes

of deviance and redemption, reinforcing the stigmatization of marginalized communities while enriching institutions that profit from the control and surveillance of these populations.

Victor Rios exemplifies the dual-edged nature of such narratives. His scholarship, which examines structural violence and the criminalization of marginalized youth, has been widely lauded for its insights into the lived realities of criminalized populations. However, Rios' academic success is also deeply tied to his ability to commodify his personal narrative as a former gang-affiliated youth, a phenomenon Rising (2024) critiques as emblematic of the profit motives underpinning the gang research industry. This selective valorization of lived experience often prioritizes individual success stories over collective structural change, allowing institutions to maintain their focus on social reproduction rather than transformation.

Brotherton (2008) highlights the limitations of such approaches, noting that frameworks rooted in social reproduction fail to challenge the systemic inequities that sustain gang involvement. Instead, these frameworks reinforce the idea that individual behavioral change, rather than structural reform, is the key to addressing societal issues. This perspective aligns with the broader neo-liberal ethos that prioritizes personal responsibility over collective accountability, allowing institutions to maintain their power while offloading responsibility for change onto marginalized communities themselves.

The commodification of ex-gang identities is not confined to academia but extends into the non-profit industrial complex, where programs like *Project Aware* claim to address gang involvement while perpetuating the very narratives that criminalize cultural expressions of marginalized communities. As Moore and Stuart (2024) argue, these programs often operate within frameworks that prioritize surveillance and control, undermining the potential for meaningful social change. The selective deployment of ex-gang narratives within these spaces reinforces a cycle of commodification and criminalization, legitimizing punitive interventions while sidelining more radical approaches that challenge systemic inequality.

The theoretical foundations of this commodification lie in the interplay between neo-liberal ideologies and the market-driven imperatives of modern institutions. By transforming lived experience into a commodity, institutions co-opt narratives of resistance and resilience, repackaging them as tools for maintaining control and generating profit. As scholars like Moore and Stuart (2022) and Brotherton (2008) underscore, any effort to disrupt this cycle must critically interrogate the structural conditions that sustain it, moving beyond superficial gestures of inclusion to address the root causes of systemic marginalization.

Gang Experts, Careerism, and Structural Inequities

Individuals who claim former gang member status often position themselves as essential intermediaries between criminalized communities and powerful institutions. Framing themselves as bridge-builders, they gain legitimacy in the eyes of law enforcement, academia, and the

nonprofit sector. This status allows them to occupy spaces of authority that would otherwise be inaccessible, granting them influence as "insider experts" uniquely qualified to interpret and address gang culture. However, this legitimacy frequently hinges on reinforcing institutional narratives that pathologize gang culture rather than advancing transformative approaches to social justice.

Moore and Stuart (2022; 2024) highlight how gang culture is increasingly viewed through institutional frameworks that prioritize control and criminalization over empowerment. By privileging punitive interventions and deficit-based understandings of gang-affiliated individuals, these frameworks marginalize perspectives that emphasize community agency, resistance, and structural reform. This institutional lens often serves to reproduce systemic inequities, embedding the notion that gang culture is inherently deviant and must be eradicated rather than understood or addressed within its broader socio-economic context.

Programs like *Project Aware* epitomize the role of the non-profit industrial complex in perpetuating these narratives. Ostensibly aimed at rehabilitation and community engagement, these initiatives frequently rely on narratives of deviance to secure funding and maintain their institutional relevance. Insider (2024) critiques this approach, arguing that such programs rarely disrupt the colonial frameworks of criminalization they claim to challenge. Instead, they entrench these frameworks further, commodifying gang identity to sustain their operations. In this model, former gang members are often cast as reformed deviants, their identities commodified to demonstrate the efficacy of these interventions while the broader structures of oppression remain intact.

The professionalization of "gang expertise" further complicates this dynamic. Scholars such as Victor Rios, who have leveraged their personal experiences to gain prominence in academia, demonstrate the dual-edged nature of this career trajectory. While Rios' work sheds light on structural violence and the criminalization of youth, it also raises questions about the extent to which such scholarship disrupts the systems it critiques. As Brotherton (2008) observes, the focus on individual narratives and behavioral change often eclipses deeper discussions of the structural inequities that underlie gang involvement. This approach not only limits the transformative potential of such work but also aligns with neo-liberal ideologies that prioritize individual responsibility over systemic reform.

The commodification of gang identities within these professional and institutional spaces serves a dual purpose: it validates the authority of self-proclaimed gang experts while reinforcing the legitimacy of the systems that criminalize marginalized communities. By framing gang involvement as an individual moral failing rather than a response to structural conditions such as poverty, racism, and social exclusion, these narratives perpetuate cycles of stigmatization and criminalization. Programs and policies ostensibly aimed at gang prevention or intervention thus become mechanisms for sustaining the status quo, funneling resources into institutions that profit from the control and surveillance of marginalized populations.

As Moore and Stuart (2024) and Rising (2024) argue, this dynamic reflects a broader socio-economic trend in which institutions commodify marginalized identities for financial and

political gain. The role of gang experts within this system illustrates the tensions between personal advancement and collective liberation. While individuals who claim former gang member status may gain personal legitimacy and success, their participation often upholds the very structures of inequity they purport to challenge. Addressing these contradictions requires a shift away from narratives of individual redemption and toward systemic change that prioritizes empowerment, equity, and justice for marginalized communities.

The Non-Profit Industrial Complex and Law Enforcement Collaboration

Non-profit organizations working in collaboration with probation and law enforcement agencies often perpetuate systemic harm under the guise of community reform and rehabilitation. These partnerships claim to address gang violence and social instability but frequently fall short of challenging the structural inequalities that underlie these issues. Brotherton (2008) underscores the limitations of such initiatives, arguing that they tend to focus narrowly on individual behavioral interventions while overlooking the broader socio-economic and racial inequities that drive gang involvement. By centering on personal transformation rather than systemic reform, these programs maintain the status quo, reinforcing rather than dismantling systems of oppression.

One common feature of these collaborations is the employment of former gang members as credible messengers. While these individuals often bring invaluable lived experience and firsthand knowledge of systemic violence, their integration into law enforcement-led initiatives often serves to legitimize punitive and surveillance-oriented approaches rather than challenge them. Moore and Stuart (2024) observe that the role of credible messengers is frequently co-opted to align with institutional priorities, such as maintaining control over marginalized communities, rather than advancing empowerment or justice. This co-optation transforms their voices into tools of systemic reinforcement, diluting their potential to advocate for structural change.

Rising (2024) critiques the profit motives deeply embedded in these collaborations, emphasizing how they prioritize institutional and financial gain over meaningful social change. The commodification of gang identities within these frameworks ensures the continued expansion of the criminal justice system, which thrives on the surveillance, criminalization, and incarceration of marginalized populations. By framing gang intervention programs as community-based initiatives, non-profits obscure their complicity in sustaining the very systems they claim to reform.

Programs like *Project Aware* exemplify these contradictions. On the surface, they claim to address gang involvement through mentorship, counseling, and community engagement. However, as Insider (2024) argues, these efforts are often rooted in colonial frameworks of criminalization, portraying marginalized communities as inherently deviant and in need of correction. Such narratives not only justify continued surveillance but also secure funding for

these initiatives by appealing to funders' desire to support "tough-on-crime" policies cloaked in the language of rehabilitation.

The integration of law enforcement and non-profit agendas into these programs further erodes their transformative potential. Collaborations between non-profits and agencies like probation offices often emphasize compliance with legal systems rather than addressing the socio-economic conditions that produce inequality. Wegerhoff, Dixon, and Ward (2019) critique this approach, noting that it reframes systemic issues such as poverty and lack of opportunity as individual moral failings. This framing allows law enforcement to maintain its dominant role in managing marginalized communities, while non-profits act as intermediaries that validate these punitive approaches under the pretense of community support.

Ultimately, the collaboration between non-profits and law enforcement represents a mutually beneficial relationship in which both parties profit from the criminalization of marginalized groups. For law enforcement, these partnerships provide a veneer of community engagement and reform, shielding them from critiques of systemic violence. For non-profits, these collaborations ensure steady funding and institutional relevance, even as they perpetuate harm. Addressing these dynamics requires a reimagining of gang intervention strategies that centers on dismantling systemic inequities rather than perpetuating them through commodified narratives of redemption and reform. As Brotherton (2008) and Rising (2024) argue, true transformation will only occur when these initiatives prioritize structural change over institutional preservation.

Conclusion: Toward Transformative Alternatives

The exploitation of ex-gang identities within academia, non-profits, and law enforcement underscores the pressing need for a fundamental reimagining of how marginalized communities are represented, engaged, and supported. These sectors, which claim to address the challenges faced by marginalized groups, often reinforce systemic inequities through the commodification of lived experiences and the perpetuation of punitive frameworks. Programs and individuals that purport to advocate for reform must critically evaluate their complicity in these systems and strive to create pathways that genuinely dismantle oppression.

Brotherton's (2008) argument for reintegrating resistance into gang theory provides a compelling framework for moving forward. To shift away from a paradigm of surveillance and commodification, future efforts must prioritize structural change, community empowerment, and the dismantling of punitive systems. This means redirecting resources away from interventions that focus on behavioral correction and toward investments in education, housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities—factors that address the root causes of social inequality.

Critical scrutiny of collaborations between former gang members, probation officers, and law enforcement reveals their limitations and unintended consequences. While these partnerships often claim to foster rehabilitation and community safety, they too frequently uphold a status quo

that marginalizes the communities they purport to serve. Programs like *Project Aware* and similar initiatives perpetuate colonial frameworks of criminalization by presenting marginalized individuals as deviant and requiring correction, ensuring their continued dependence on a legal system designed to surveil and punish rather than liberate and empower.

Moreover, as Rising (2024) and Insider (2024) suggest, the commodification of gang identities within these frameworks not only upholds harmful stereotypes but also provides a financial and reputational boon to the institutions and individuals involved. This dynamic prioritizes profit and institutional survival over meaningful engagement with systemic inequality, deepening mistrust between marginalized communities and the entities that claim to support them.

A genuine commitment to justice requires rejecting commodified narratives of redemption and reform. Instead, it necessitates building community-centered interventions that amplify the voices of marginalized groups without reproducing cycles of criminalization. Such efforts must go beyond tokenistic representation and engage with the structural roots of social harm. They should involve partnerships with grassroots organizations that prioritize the self-determination of communities and create opportunities for collective action against systemic oppression.

Ultimately, transforming these systems requires a bold reimagining of what justice, rehabilitation, and community support can look like. It involves not only rejecting punitive models of social control but also envisioning and enacting alternatives rooted in equity, liberation, and solidarity. Only by centering the needs, voices, and aspirations of those most affected by systemic inequities can we begin to dismantle the oppressive structures that perpetuate harm and move toward a truly transformative approach to justice.

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