

Gangster Anthropologist

*Jorja Leap / Youth violence researcher
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By Vince Beiser

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What's her deal? Jorja Leap immersed herself in the culture of Los Angeles' notorious street gangs for over 10 years, interviewing and working with hundreds of active and former gang members.

Isn't that dangerous? "I started out in the late 1970s as this skinny little white social worker going into the projects." When she returned to the streets years later as an anthropologist, former gang members she knew accompanied and vouched for her. "I've been in dangerous situations, but always felt very protected."

Complicating personal detail: Husband is a former LAPD deputy chief. "He wanted me to stop my work because he felt it wasn't safe. And gang members would plant stories with me to see if I would take them back to him." It took time to get everyone's trust. "Things got better after he retired."

Surprising research finding #1: The further up someone is in the gang hierarchy the better their chances of going straight. "A shot caller in a gang has a much greater chance to be a leader in mainstream life. They may be semiliterate high school dropouts, but a lot of them are very smart. The same skills that elevated them in the neighborhood will help them succeed elsewhere. The neighborhood recognizes talent, make no mistake."



Surprising research finding #2: "There's an emerging group of lesbians integrated into gang structure. Gangs do abuse women—there's trafficking, there's domestic violence, there's rape. But in addition to that, women are taking increasingly active roles, especially lesbians. They're often very active and engaged in violence. What's amazing is that the homophobia does not extend to them."

The bottom line? "Keep kids out of gangs with after-school and evening programs, and keep former members getting out of prison from going back to gang life by providing mental health services and jobs. And interwoven with all of that is relationships. People aren't going to change because you tell them to. They'll change because you give them a mentor, a role model, a friend to guide them in another way."

Read more at bit.ly/OF4bu5