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Term Paper

### Gamine Gang Life: An Effective Survival Method, but a Destructive Societal Force

Jhon Alexander Gomez<sup>1</sup> is a street urchin in the city of Cali, Colombia. Though he looks and acts much like you would expect of a homeless child, begging for money, and sleeping on the street, the life, opportunities and choices he has are considerably different for him than those children in other such situations around the world. Jhon has not been abandoned, nor did he officially run away from home. He lives a half life, visiting his mother and two sister, sometimes bringing money, other times staying only to sleep. He has not only had to make a life for himself on the streets, as all street urchins must, but he has also faced the dangerous of “social cleanings,” his fellow heavily armed street children, the hierarchy of gang life, drugs and alcohol.

What would draw Jhon to the streets, even with such challenges? As a result of Jhon family life, which was almost nonexistent other than its relation to a floor to sleep on, Jhon looked for something that would provide him a means of consistent support, for himself and his mother. The gang life found on the streets of Cali was his answer. He met other boys that had access to many things through the crime industries they were involved in. And though today Jhon is still identifiable by the state of his clothes and hygiene as a gamine, or Colombian street urchin, he has become integrated into the life of

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<sup>1</sup> Jhon is a fictional character created with the help of Colombian student Fanny Luca

a child gang that provides him with many opportunities in comparison with his life at home.

The child gang life found on many of the streets of Colombia has become a powerful force in shaping the cycle of violence that continues to plague the rural life of Colombia. As is the case in Jhon, gang life has many characteristics that draw children to them. The gangs serve the purpose of providing some extremely necessary services that gamines need in order to survive in their tumultuous environment. However, because the lure of gang life is so strong, gangs are negating the influence of legitimate social welfare organizations that could help move some of these children from the outskirts of society into a life that has some involvement with it. The authority that gangs have is being used destructively, inserting commonality of violence, drugs and institutionalized crime that gamines would otherwise have a lower instance of being involved in on their own (Perea). In short, child gangs are a problem because they strongly draw children, keep them once they've joined and teach them violence while they are apart of the group. Child gangs, therefore, are a powerful mediator in the lives of gamines but are a destructive force in the efforts of social betterment in urban Colombia.

When gamines are generally studied, talked about or reported on in Colombia it is because some kind of violence or crime is being attributed to them. But when considering why the state of gamines' lives is important, looking beyond the problems they cause is a necessary first step. First consider that in 2003, 523,000 children were in foster care in the United States (ChildTrends). This means that a large amount of children of a relatively economically stable country need to be removed from their family environment to protect their welfare and development. Colombia has no foster care

system that supports children in this way. The consequence of this is that those children that western society views as in need foster care end up instead on the streets, fending for themselves. When considered from this perspective, the “nuisance,” as they are often thought of, gamines is a much bigger concern (Luca). Imagining a situation when troubled children were pushed to the fringes of society instead of being cared for seems only dangerous for that society. If the younger people of a society are its future, than a society where children must turn to gangs as their only source of acceptance seems a dangerous future.

Gamines, or “the disposable ones” as they are sometimes referred to, are children generally in the age group of six to the years of adolescence (Let the Children Live!). In most cases, these young people do not have permanent places of residence, unless they gain territory on the streets, claiming a doorway to sleep in. They live and sleep on the streets. Though almost all the children share the same living conditions, there are many reasons why children find their way to the streets. Gamine gangs are about as unique and individual as the children that make them up. It was recently published in the Colombian newspaper El Tiempo in an April edition that there was around 803 gangs that existed in Bogotá alone. Gang life is believed to be rapidly growing and expanding for many reasons, but one is because the children that are making their way to the streets are primarily from two distinct sets of backgrounds, those like Jhon still who are still connected to their families in some ways, and children who have made themselves completely independent (Felsman).

In a study performed in Cali three distinct subgroups of gamine children were found to exist on the streets (Felsman). The group that is often thought as of the largest

cause for children being on the streets, being orphaned or abandoned, was found to be only seven percent of the sample. Those children that were part of this group however, were most often abandoned, not orphaned, and were usually left because they were unable to be cared for because of some kind of handicap. This group also includes children of the 287,581 people displaced yearly who might have been left behind because of the displacement (Lopes). The second group was made up of children who had some kind of family ties that were actively maintained, as in the case of Jhon, though they spent their time on the streets, usually as a result of overcrowding or difficult living conditions at home, or the need for another income. This was the largest of the studied sample group. Many of these children are involved in pursuing an income during their times on the streets, selling gum, candy, guarding cars or shining shoes (Inciardi 3). The last, middle size group, were those children who had broken all ties with families or any other kinds of institutions. These children are completely responsible for their own wellbeing, and made the choice to leave home and separate themselves from it. These children will often be the most risk taking and also successful group (Felsman). This group usually leaves homes as a result of overcrowding, neglect, malnutrition or some form of exploitation (Inciardi 3). The results of Felsman's study indicate something important – the two groups of children that mainly occupy the streets, and thereby make up child gangs, are some what strong and healthy, raised for some period of time by an adult. Instead of being weak and helpless, abandoned or orphaned, most of these children have some sense of decision and purpose when they enter the culture of the streets, making their placement in a gang probably much stronger than if they didn't get their intentionally.

The process of learning how to survive for the children that comes to the streets is a complex one. These children face a multitude of challenges, depending on the background that they came from. Those children abandoned, generally because of handicap, have the obviously most difficult time. Though they have a begging advantage to other children (visible manifestations of their difficulties, producing a tendency towards members of society giving money to them), they have the hardship of trying to claim territory within the area that they are in (Shine-a-Light). This is a common challenge to any newly arrived and unestablished youth entering the streets, especially enhanced in those who are handicapped. The abandoned children are also generally younger, and also have no sort of fall back when they first arrive on the streets, since their families have left them. This situation is different from the intermediate group of children, who can slowly leave their family, or the completely independent group who generally has more experience if they've made the choice to be completely free of any family ties or, if they don't have any experience, generally are older in age (Felsman). Those children who still have family connections and therefore some place to sleep is more likely to be involved in noncriminal activities to raise an income, generally for their household. As in the case of Jhon, these households are generally made up of an impoverished single mother (Inciardi 3). The children of the intermediate and independent groups however, still have the difficulty of finding ways of entering into a system that provide defense, fellowship, territory and in income while on the streets.

Understanding the hardships a child faces when he or she enters the streets is sheds light on why gangs so powerfully draw children as soon as they enter the streets. They either face the challenge of trying to enter the system that exists on the streets or

defend themselves against it. As a result, these children have two main options, finding assistance in an institutionalized social welfare organization, or becoming a gang member. The first option is the least often embraced by the gamines. Given what is known about the three main types of children on the streets this is understandable. The independent group of children has already chosen to separate themselves from institutions of the inclusive society that they cannot become a part of. The intermediate already have some form of authority, their parents, which they report to. There are other contributing factors to the avoidance of using these facilities, but the children's background is a primary force in their decision (Felsman). However, it should be noted that children of the first group, who are handicapped, will turn to these organizations. Often times they are not welcome in gangs, and have no other option.

The second option, joining a gang of some type, is the most commonly followed path of a child entering the streets. Gangs fulfill one of the most instantaneous needs of a gamine, providing a means of survival and some form of protection. It also provides a system that conveys a sense of belonging to its members promotes loyalty and provides protection (Shine-a-Light). It also may provide connections to the main street economies, such as drug trafficking and prostitution and prevents forcing a child to have to find their own way into these industries (Inciardi 3).

Gamines are drawn to gangs. Considering many of their backgrounds and the options they have once they enter the streets, gang life may seem like the logical next step which is part of the reason gangs are such powerful forces in these children's lives. However, the draw of gang life isn't the only contributing factor to their power; what happens once one is established in them is a large part of it. Gang life keeps its members

busy by providing a system that includes hierarchy, honor, arms provisions, cross gang rivalry, income, territory and stability of sleeping location (Perea) Gangs gives gamines a sense of inclusion (hierarchy, honor), something they lack from society, and a means of survival (income, arms).

Gamine gangs are a powerful force on children because they attract and keep their members. This in itself is not bad. However, gangs are contributing to several detrimental issues relating to gamines. The first is that they serve as significant problem for getting children off the streets, or just to get them to seek medical or other kind of attention from government or charitable organizations. The gangs provide not only weapons to its members but also “money, work, protection and a feeling of identity,” (Shine-a-light). Gangs foster feelings of belong and loyalty, making its members feel weak or as if they were betraying there other members if they turn to social welfare organizations. Children that have come from gangs are often more unwilling to accept institutionalized authority because they have had a sense of autonomy while in the gang. Acceptance of institutionalized authority is generally necessary for housing, care or any other services to be provided. Additionally, there services compared to the social services options open to the children are often, simply not as good. Shelters are just as dangerous for those staying in them, and just as political as the gang ridden streets.

Gang involvement also fosters many types of violence and crime, which has destructive consequences beyond the deaths and wounds that result. One area where this is particularly destructive is with families. Gangs serve to move many of the children in the intermediate gamine group to the independent group. As a result of the gang wars and violence having family that is close by and possible to have contact with can mean

that they are putting their families at risk for attack. Entire families have been massacred in such violence (Amis). This degrades the family unit by decreasing the likelihood of impoverished families staying together. Additionally, gamines that grow up on the streets and have very little exposure to the concept of a stable family will be much less able to create a functional family once they have grown up. This may increase the likelihood of unwanted pregnancies, the children of which will end up on the streets, continuing the cycle.

The violence that gamines become involved with as a result of being involved with a gang not only pushes families apart, but also serves to negatively affect them and urban Colombia by promoting the survival of criminal institutions. Gamine gangs are hired out to do a variety of things such as rob, assassin, or drug traffic for adults or criminal bodies (Inciardi 3). Additionally they serve to be good recruits for paramilitaries or guerilla groups (Perea). These groups will recruit the children to work as child soldiers, contributing to these organizations survival and success, and harming the children and putting their lives at risk (Kincaid). Gamines are also known and used because of their disposability. As a result, using them in criminal activities that are dangerous, either because of the possibility of violence and death, or as a result of the likelihood of being stopped by the authorities, they easily help continue systems of prostitution, thievery, assassination and drug trafficking. These children make their way into these routes of illegal activities through their gang membership because entire gangs are easier to recruit to than aloof individuals (Inciardi 3).

Gang activity not only promotes violence amongst gamine communities and urban areas, but it also serves to legitimize the violence and crime that the children are



involved in. Violence between gangs, originally begun in the name of some injured point of honor, and the dynamics involved in the activities that the gangs participate in, necessitate patterns and hierarchy to their gang life. As a result, the gangs may represent a permissible community to become a member of, making the activities of that community acceptable in the children's mind as they grow up. It is in this way that violence and industries of criminal activity is being legitimization of by gamine gangs which is promoting and increasing the tendency of the survival of illegal activities in urban Colombia. Growing up in the violent and unlawful communities that they find in the streets that are legitimized by their structure teach entire generations of gamines that crime and violence are a genuine and necessary ways of life, promoting their continuation.

The state of gamine life in large cities of Colombia is an issue as more and more children turn to gang life. The destructiveness of gangs is a real force in what is contributing to the continuation of urban violence. In addition to the ways power that gangs hold to keep their members, and the ways in which they serve to tap their members into violence and crime is also contributed to by the way the problem is currently being managed. Many types of organizations have become involved in trying to help gamines, from government sponsored organizations and individuals who have campaigned against the conditions these children are allowed to live, such as Jamine Jaramillo (New Intern.). Additionally, religious institutions like the Catholic churches present in areas of gamines also make efforts to help these children (Shine-A-Light). And though such organizations have made tremendous efforts and some headway, some things about them contribute to gang activity. None of these organizations work with gangs, but only with individuals

(Ploeg 53). This is problematic because so many of the gamines' identities are within the gangs, and if they leave to find help from these institutions, they are seen as traitors (Shine-A-Light). Additionally, because resources are very scarce for these organizations, they often do not have competitive facilities with the gangs for gamines. This includes better living conditions, medical care and food. Additionally, many of the shelters that exist for the children are not safe. They are wracked with the same issues of hierarchy that are found in the gangs; children who are weak will be abused and mistreated by older, strong children (Shine-A-Light). Staying on the street may seem like a better option for these children as a result.

The gangs that the gamines currently turn to are an effective survival tool that they have constructed for themselves. It provides many of the things that all humans require and need not only food and clothing, but also a sense of belonging and purpose. Gamines are some of the most excluded of Colombian society; they are young, helpless, and in need of love. It is no wonder then that these children are in growing numbers turning to gangs as a source of those things they need most. Child gangs are a cheap, disposable fuel for urban violence, a serious issue that if given consideration may be the key to change in Colombia.

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