

## Chapter 4

# Liberian Gangs: The Impact of American Gang and Popular Culture

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### **ABSTRACT**

*While research in the United States still grapples to understand the formation and persistence of gangs, American gangs' impact and influence on other populations across the globe are astonishing. One of these places of influence, Africa, has a long collective history of social, political, and economic turmoil, creating a space for social inequalities that some would consider the foundational grounds for criminal deviance and social chaos. When providing a comparative criminological lens, gangs tend to emerge from historical trauma, rooted in poverty and fueled in growth by national and international media and cultural influences.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

For centuries the intricacies of gang formation and growth had been a complex phenomenon. Rooted in a criminological and sociological understanding, researchers have applied multiple social theories to why and how gangs form globally with explanations organized as structural or process-based. Structural-based theories suggest that the climate of an individual's social surroundings (community culture and the economic disadvantages faced in that individual's social surroundings) fosters behaviors that digress from societal and legal norms (Seigel, 2010). On the other hand, process theories emphasize the impact of socialization on creating the

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optimal breeding ground for criminal deviance. In examining why criminal deviance is affluent in particular spaces, researchers suggest that poverty has plagued gang growth throughout Africa (Matsueda, 2017; Phillips & Martiz, 2015; Seigel, 2010). For countries such as Liberia, the gang and popular culture influences of the United States (U.S.) has spiraled an already fragile country into turmoil, with many youths attempting to recreate their perspectives of American gang and popular culture. The consensus on defining a gang, criminal gang, street gang (and other related terms) has been academically and socially fragmented. The definition relies heavily on the illegal behaviors and acts these groups commit. While gang culture, just like any other culture, is foundational to the norms, customs, values, and beliefs established within the group.

To further explore how the U.S. has contributed to influencing the gang culture in countries such as Liberia, examiners must (1) understand the theoretical context of crime from a U.S. normative (white) perspective, (2) acknowledge the U.S. assisted conflict and corruption that has historically impacted Liberia, (3) examine the global gang narrative that the U.S. has fueled through American Black bodies, and (4) comprehend the more considerable consequences of Black American narratives translation through mainstream media.

## **BACKGROUND**

American criminologists and sociologists alike have spent decades explaining the impact that gangs have had within the country. Some of the main theories provide a pivotal window into the lives of those from impoverished and socially unequal neighborhoods in which gang culture has thrived. The notion of understanding why and how these groups formed birthed theories that explained the conflict, strain, disorganization, cultural differences, learning, and control in which society had placed these groups. A well-known sociologist with Marxist perspectives has utilized Karl Marx's understanding of social settings, economics, and structure and applied those thoughts to the field of criminology. Marxist theories explained gangs as an overall collective group whose fundamental formation was based on their societal connections of class and social status, which are then exploited by those with higher societal powers (Colvin & Pauly, 1983; Lynch & Boggess, 2016; Pearson & Weiner, 1985). The theory can be easily understood as the conflict between individuals in poverty and the fulfillment of basic needs versus those in control of how and if those needs are met. While Marxist ideas explained gangs and the poverty they experience on a macro level, it was not inclusive in accounting for inequalities that many Black Americans experience within communities with higher rates of gang activities (Lynch & Boggess, 2016). Another theory that emerged is credited to

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