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Neighborhood Gangs: A Sociological Analysis from the Perspective of Subcultural Theory

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Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of neighborhood gangs from a sociological perspective, situated within the context of the rapid urban, social, and economic transformations experienced by Algerian cities over recent decades. These multifaceted structural shifts, coupled with systemic marginalization, tenuous social integration, and the erosion of conventional social control mechanisms, have fostered environments conducive to the emergence of diverse modalities of deviance and urban crime—most saliently, neighborhood gangs. The primary objective of this research is to deploy Subcultural Theory to conceptualize and deconstruct neighborhood gangs as distinctive collectivities that generate autonomous systems of values, normative codes, and symbolic repertoires divergent from dominant societal culture. Concurrently, these formations provide their members with alternative avenues for subjective belonging, social status, symbolic recognition, and mutual protection. The study delineates the structural and operational characteristics of these gangs, including demarcated territorial domains, nascent hierarchical organization, collective group identity, specialized delinquent subcultures, pervasive peer group dynamics, the instrumentalization of violence, and sustained engagement in illicit practices. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that gang affiliation is precipitated by an intricate interplay of micro- and macro-level determinants, encompassing familial disintegration, educational attrition, youth unemployment, acute poverty, institutional marginalization, and deeply felt psychological exigencies for recognition and defensive shielding. In this analytical matrix, Albert K. Cohen's seminal thesis offers an indispensable theoretical paradigm for

understanding the etiology of delinquent subcultures via the construct of 'status frustration', which arises from the structural inability of working-class youth to attain normative success metrics established by the middle-class measuring rod. Consequently, alienated youth coalesce into alternative subcultural enclaves grounded in reaction formation and oppositional normative codes. The paper concludes that while Subcultural Theory yields profound insights into group dynamics, internalized value codes, status deprivation, and symbolic interactionism, it does not exhaust the holistic complexity of the phenomenon, thereby necessitating an integrative synthesis with complementary sociological paradigms.

Keywords: Neighborhood Gangs; Subcultural Theory; Social Deviance; Urban Crime; Status Frustration; Albert Cohen; Peer Group; Criminology.

Introduction

In recent decades, contemporary societies have witnessed an escalating proliferation of crime-related social phenomena, which have come to pose grave security dilemmas and profound sociological challenges across diverse national contexts. The perilous nature of this phenomenon extends far beyond immediate transgressions of codified legal statutes; it fundamentally disrupts social value frameworks, destabilizes organic community ties, and actively reproduces durable patterns of delinquent socialization within precarious social ecologies.

Neighborhood gangs do not emerge *ex nihilo* or in an arbitrary vacuum. Rather, they represent the structured outcome of a multidimensional convergence of socioeconomic, structural, and cultural dynamics. Chief among these factors are structural marginalization, chronic youth unemployment, institutional failures within primary and secondary socialization agencies, familial instability, and the intensifying gravitation toward peer networks. These converging pressures compel disenfranchised youth to seek alternative conduits for interpersonal belonging and social validation within collective formations that confer distinctive group identities and substitute status hierarchies. Within this analytical horizon, Subcultural Theory assumes paramount sociological relevance, as it elucidates how such youth collectivities formulate an autonomous matrix of values, norms, and symbolic codes that systematically diverge from mainstream societal expectations, functioning as an overarching normative compass that orchestrates member behavior, solidifies internal cohesion, and demands unyielding group loyalty.

Grounded in this epistemological imperative, the present study undertakes a comprehensive sociological examination of neighborhood gangs through the analytical framework of Subcultural Theory. By interrogating the structural, cultural, and institutional determinants underpinning gang

genesis and perpetuation, this research aspires to articulate an integrative conceptual framework capable of informing both academic scholarship and strategic policy interventions in the domain of urban crime prevention.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this investigation resides in its sustained focus on an urgent contemporary social crisis that commands the attention of criminologists, sociologists, and public policymakers alike: the phenomenon of neighborhood gangs. Given its deleterious ramifications for community security, social cohesion, and the integrity of normative structures, the phenomenon demands rigorous scholarly scrutiny. Furthermore, the inquiry derives substantial theoretical weight from its mobilization of Subcultural Theory as a foundational paradigm for deconstructing deviant behavior, thereby illuminating the dialectical relationship between the urban environment and delinquent collectivities. Finally, the study contributes meaningfully to the sociological literature on crime and deviance within the Global South and the Arab world, providing an evidence-based, theory-driven analysis of the socio-cultural catalysts governing the emergence, consolidation, and operational continuity of neighborhood gangs.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Over recent decades, Algerian urban landscapes have undergone rapid, sweeping metamorphoses characterized by sprawling spatial expansion, accelerated demographic growth, and intense rural-to-urban migratory flows, alongside profound economic restructurings and sociocultural transformations that have touched every facet of urban existence. These structural shifts have fundamentally reconstituted the social morphology of Algerian cities and altered the nature of inter-individual and inter-group interactions. Consequently, multiple social vulnerabilities have crystallized, among which the resurgence and reconfiguration of delinquent behavior have emerged as pivotal subjects in contemporary urban sociology.

Urban crime stands as one of the most visible correlates of rapid modernization and urban spatial reorganization. Extensive sociological literature underscores the intimate causal linkage between structural urban conditions and the etiology of criminal patterns. The modern metropolis—marked by elevated population density, socioeconomic stratification, highly unequal access to formal integration mechanisms, and the noticeable retrenchment of informal community social control—creates an ecological breeding ground conducive to novel configurations of delinquency, prominently exemplified by territorial neighborhood gangs.

Subcultural Theory offers one of the most rigorous sociological frameworks for deciphering delinquency and collective transgression. The paradigm posits that marginalized groups situated in precarious structural contexts develop distinct cultural systems characterized by oppositional norms, values, and symbolic repertoires. From this analytical viewpoint, neighborhood gangs cannot be dismissed as mere ad hoc criminal aggregations; rather, they must be understood as sociologically coherent collectivities generating their own normative subcultures anchored in group solidarity, status acquisition, and reciprocal recognition—frequently manifested through behavioral patterns that explicitly defy codified societal laws and mainstream morality.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the neighborhood gang phenomenon from an integrative sociological perspective, deploying Subcultural Theory to investigate how shared delinquent norms and collective dynamics sustain gang formation and longevity. To guide this inquiry, the overarching research question is formulated as follows:

To what extent does Subcultural Theory provide an explanatory framework for understanding the phenomenon of neighborhood gangs as a manifestation of collective social deviance?

From this central question, several subsidiary analytical inquiries emerge:

1. **Conceptual Parameters:** How are neighborhood gangs and delinquent subcultures conceptually defined and operationalized within criminological sociology?
2. **Etiological Determinants:** What are the primary socioeconomic, familial, and structural catalysts driving the emergence and proliferation of neighborhood gangs?
3. **Theoretical Mechanisms:** How does Subcultural Theory mechanistically explain the genesis, normative consolidation, and behavioral trajectory of neighborhood gangs?
4. **Epistemological Boundaries:** What are the theoretical and methodological limitations of Subcultural Theory in explaining this phenomenon relative to alternative sociological paradigms?

Research Hypotheses

General Hypothesis

Subcultural Theory provides a robust explanatory paradigm for analyzing neighborhood gangs as autonomous collectivities that generate distinct normative codes and oppositional value systems, thereby structurally predisposing members toward organized patterns of social deviance.

Subsidiary Hypotheses

- **Structural Precariousness:** Marginal socioeconomic and spatial conditions foster the emergence of oppositional delinquent subcultures manifested as neighborhood gangs.
- **Normative Cohesion:** Neighborhood gangs rely on an internalized system of specialized values, argot, and symbolic markers that fortify intra-group solidarity and institutionalize group loyalty.
- **Socialization Deficits:** Intensified peer group gravitation, combined with the attrition of formal and informal socialization institutions, accelerates youth integration into neighborhood gangs.
- **Explanatory Complementarity:** While Subcultural Theory substantially illuminates critical dimensions of gang dynamics—specifically status frustration and collective adaptation—it remains insufficient to account for all structural and macro-institutional determinants without complementary theoretical frameworks.

Literature Review

1. International Empirical Inquiries

In her pioneering criminological investigation into categories of delinquency, Mary Carpenter examined the taxonomic classification of juvenile offenders based on their degree of social maladjustment and perceived threat to community welfare. Her classification delineated several distinct cohorts: juveniles emerging from chronically unstable familial and domestic settings; juveniles raised directly within entrenched delinquent milieus; and juveniles propelled toward deviance primarily through institutional neglect or severe economic privation. Carpenter's empirical contributions underscored the decisive primacy of early social environments and socialization agents in configuring persistent deviant career trajectories.

2. Regional and Arab Inquiries

Adli Al-Samari (1999) conducted an extensive empirical study on violent behavioral patterns among youth, examining the etiological roots and behavioral manifestations of violence across a diverse sample of students, pedagogical instructors, and parents. The findings revealed that youth violence is inextricably correlated with acute domestic conflicts, institutional fractures between educational systems and families, precarious economic conditions, and media exposure to aggressive behavioral models. Al-Samari concluded by emphasizing the indispensable role of coordinated family interventions and community-level social institutions in mitigating youthful aggression.

3. Domestic and Algerian Inquiries

Ali Bouanaka (1989) explored the nexus between juvenile crime and socioeconomic precarity in underprivileged Algerian neighborhoods. Surveying an empirical sample of Algerian youth, his findings demonstrated that systemic youth unemployment, severe school dropout rates, deficits in vocational training infrastructures, the acute absence of recreational facilities, and pervasive sociocultural alienation constituted paramount structural engines driving the escalation of criminal socialization and deviant adaptations.

More recently, an authoritative institutional study by the National Gendarmerie Command (2021) examined the spreading factors of neighborhood gangs across Algeria, particularly following the promulgation of Presidential Order No. 20-03 of August 30, 2020, dedicated to the prevention and combat of neighborhood gangs. Covering major metropolitan hubs—including Algiers, Oran, Constantine, Tipaza, Batna, Boumerdès, Mostaganem, Chlef, and Bordj Bou Arréridj—the field study sought to identify spatial concentrations and sociological profiles of gang affiliates (Sewakri, 2023).

The findings established that neighborhood gangs are predominantly active within recently developed social housing complexes, dense popular quarters, and informal spontaneous settlements. Between January 2018 and August 2021, security forces registered 158 gang-related criminal cases, implicating 793 individuals, with 306 individuals remanded into judicial custody. The empirical profile revealed that the overwhelming majority possessed prior judicial records, engaging systematically in illicit psychotropic and drug distribution, aggravated theft, and territorial assaults, deploying blunt weapons and bladed arms to establish localized intimidation and dominance (Sewakri, 2023).

Demographically, the study identified young men aged 18 to 30 as the cohort most acutely vulnerable to gang recruitment, whereas female involvement remained virtually negligible. The investigation attributed this pronounced vulnerability to structural deficits in youth capital mobilization, the collapse of educational retention, high joblessness, and a dearth of structured sociocultural engagement, leaving disenfranchised youth acutely susceptible to coercive peer pressures and deviant group assimilation (Sewakri, 2023).

Conceptual Framework: The Phenomenon of Neighborhood Gangs

1. Definitional Dimensions of Neighborhood Gangs

Neighborhood gangs represent a complex socio-criminological phenomenon intrinsic to modern urban deviance. They are broadly conceptualized as collectivities comprised predominantly of adolescent and young adult males, characterized by perceptible degrees of organizational

hierarchy, collective in-group consciousness, and sustained engagement in illicit practices aimed at securing tangible economic gains, establishing localized hegemony, and defending spatially demarcated territories.

A. Legal-Statutory Definition

In Algerian jurisprudence, neighborhood gangs are formally codified under Article 2 of Presidential Order No. 20-03 of August 30, 2020, relating to the Prevention and Suppression of Neighborhood Gangs. The statute defines a gang as: 'Any group, regardless of its denomination, composed of two or more persons belonging to one or more residential neighborhoods, established with the objective of committing acts that create a state of insecurity within residential quarters or impose spatial domination through physical violence, deploying weapons, threats, or acts of coercion.'

B. Sociological and Theoretical Conceptualization

Sociologically, neighborhood gangs are conceptualized as deviant primary groups emerging organically within geographically demarcated and socially strained urban habitats, rooted in an intricate nexus of interpersonal relationships, mutual loyalty, and specialized normative systems. These collectivities deploy physical intimidation and symbolic violence to command social recognition and secure spatial sovereignty over their operational spheres. They exhibit defining elements of social organization, including internal leadership strata, strong in-group affiliation, territorial bounding, and durable illicit practices.

In Anglo-American sociological scholarship, the emergence of the modern gang concept was historically tied to the rapid expansion of industrial metropolises. The Chicago School of Sociology pioneered the scientific investigation of gangs, framing them as direct ecological artifacts of rapid urbanization, community disorganization, and weakened institutional cohesion. Frederic Thrasher's (1927) foundational monograph, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, conceptualized the gang as an interstitial group that coalesces spontaneously in the decaying zones of the metropolis, providing youth with a vital vehicle for solidarity, adventure, and identity during the turbulent transitional passage from adolescence to adulthood.

Building on this tradition, William Foote Whyte (1943), in *Street Corner Society*, demonstrated that corner gangs are not chaotic aggregates of antisocial deviants, but rather highly structured social orders possessing intricate mutual obligations, distinct leadership hierarchies, and functional roles that supply vital psychological and social buffering for their members. Gerald Suttles (1968), in *The Social Order of the Slum*, established that territorial gangs in ethnically diverse, socially disorganized communities serve an 'ordered segmentation' function, organizing social relations and

collective defense around localized territorial loyalties. John Pitts (2007) differentiated between highly organized criminal enterprises (driven primarily by corporate, profit-maximizing illegal trafficking) and informal youth street gangs whose primary currency revolves around violence, territorial defense ('turf'), and masculine reputation. Finally, Oscar Lewis (1966) linked marginal urban collectivities to the 'culture of poverty', suggesting that prolonged socioeconomic exclusion produces persistent cultural adaptations characterized by resignation, present-oriented hedonism, and localized subcultural violence.

2. Core Sociological Characteristics of Neighborhood Gangs

Empirical and theoretical analyses reveal that neighborhood gangs exhibit distinctive sociostructural attributes:

- **Geographically Demarcated Territory (Turf):** Gangs operate within precise spatial perimeters (specific housing blocks, alleyways, or urban quarters), asserting hegemonic control and aggressively repelling encroachment by rival factions.
- **Internal Organization and Leadership:** While varying in sophistication, gangs maintain rudimentary to moderately organized hierarchical command structures wherein recognized leaders orchestrate collective actions, enforce internal discipline, and coordinate external disputes.
- **Collective Identity and In-Group Cohesion:** Members share a potent group consciousness sustained through collective monikers, shared experiences of marginality, mutual obligations, and unwavering interpersonal solidarity.
- **Autonomous Subcultural Matrix:** Gangs articulate distinct systems of values, normative scripts, and symbolic codes that deliberately invert conventional bourgeois morality, prioritizing aggressive physical prowess, honor defense, and absolute loyalty (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).
- **Instrumentalization and Normalization of Violence:** Physical aggression is not merely an incidental tactic; it functions as a primary currency for negotiating status, commanding deference, and signaling deterrence. Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) observed that within violent subcultures, physical force is normalized as a socially expected and morally approved response to interpersonal conflict.
- **Peer Group Primacy and Differential Association:** The peer cluster serves as the primary crucible for deviant enculturation. As Edwin Sutherland (1947) articulated in Differential Association Theory, criminal attitudes, values, and rationalizations are systematically learned through sustained, intimate interaction with intimate groups defining deviance positively.

- **Engagement in Chronic Illicit Enterprises:** Gangs engage routinely in outlawed endeavors, ranging from extortion, robbery, and physical assaults to the street-level trafficking of narcotics and psychotropic pills, embedding criminality into the gang's collective lifestyle and economic survival (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

3. Etiology of Gang Affiliation and Risk Factors

Criminologists emphasize that young individuals gravitate toward street gangs under the subjective conviction that the collectivity fulfills vital psychological, affective, and structural needs—specifically the quest for belonging, respect, self-worth, social status, fraternal friendship, and collective shielding against hostile environmental forces (Gharibi & Kasmiah, 2016). These etiological determinants can be categorized into five foundational risk matrices:

- **Familial Factors:** Severe domestic dysfunction, parental absence, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, lax supervision, and the absence of positive authoritative role models.
- **Educational Factors:** Academic underachievement, systemic school dropout, disciplinary exclusion, alienating school environments, and hostile pedagogical relationships.
- **Economic Factors:** Structural youth unemployment, severe household poverty, lack of legitimate economic mobility, and inability to satisfy consumer aspirations through lawful means.
- **Societal & Ecological Factors:** Urban marginality, decaying neighborhood infrastructure, spatial segregation, absence of recreational and cultural spaces, and the breakdown of community social cohesion.
- **Psychological Factors:** Chronic subjective alienation, status anxiety, perceived worthlessness, existential despair, hyper-masculinity, and an acute psychological demand for external validation.

Subcultural Theory in Criminological Sociology

1. Conceptual Foundations of Subcultural Theory

In general sociological discourse, a subculture designates a distinctive cultural enclave existing within a broader societal system, characterized by idiosyncratic values, lifestyle traits, and behavioral scripts, while maintaining tenuous linkage to the overarching macro-culture (Al-Hassan, 2005). Within criminological sociology, subcultural theories offer sophisticated frameworks to explain sustained deviance by examining how structurally disadvantaged groups establish alternative normative codes that diverge radically from dominant societal consensus.

In this specialized context, a delinquent subculture constitutes an integrated system of values, moral justifications, and symbolic behaviors embraced by a subordinate collectivity that legitimize and reward transgressions deemed unlawful by the larger society (Cohen, 1955). Pioneering criminologists demonstrate that juvenile gangs formulate specialized subcultural standards that confer high social honor and peer prestige upon behaviors specifically proscribed by dominant institutional rules (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

2. Albert K. Cohen's Model of the Delinquent Subculture

A. Genesis and Theoretical Heritage

Subcultural theory ascended to theoretical prominence during the mid-20th century, emerging principally within the American sociological landscape against a backdrop of escalating post-war juvenile delinquency in major urban metropolitan centers (Cullen & Agnew, 2011). The theoretical framework emerged as an intellectual corrective to the explanatory shortcomings of classical functionalist paradigms, most notably Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory. While Merton provided a compelling structural analysis of how disjunctions between universal cultural goals (wealth) and institutionalized means generate anomie, his model conceived adaptation on an atomized, individualistic plane. Consequently, Mertonian strain was incapable of explaining collective, non-utilitarian deviance—such as malicious property vandalism, territorial gang warfare, and senseless rowdiness—that lacked apparent economic rationale (Cohen, 1955).

Recognizing these theoretical voids, researchers in the 1950s increasingly posited that juvenile transgression was not merely an isolated psychological pathology or atomized strain reaction, but a robust collective adaptation forged through group interaction, yielding autonomous normative frameworks distinct from the dominant social compact (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). This intellectual pivot shifted the foundational sociological inquiry from 'Why does an individual deviate?' to the more systemic question: 'How do deviant subcultures originate, consolidate, and reproduce themselves across time?'

B. Key Intellectual Figures and Theoretical Trajectories

The historical development of subcultural criminological theory is delineated by three foundational theoretical milestones:

1. **Albert K. Cohen (1955):** Widely acknowledged as the seminal architect of classic subcultural theory through his landmark monograph, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. Cohen focused specifically on lower-class adolescent boys, developing the core concepts of 'Status Frustration' and 'Reaction Formation' to account for the emergence of oppositional delinquent subcultures.

2. **Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960):** Significantly broadened subcultural theory in Delinquency and Opportunity by synthesizing Merton's strain paradigm with Sutherland's differential association. They formulated 'Differential Opportunity Theory', positing that access to illegitimate means is structured just as unequally as access to legitimate channels. They categorized deviant subcultures into three distinct empirical typologies: Criminal Subcultures (profit-driven, integrated illegal enterprises), Conflict Subcultures (violent territorial street gangs in disorganized neighborhoods), and Retreatist Subcultures (escapist, drug-centered 'double failures').
3. **Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti (1967):** Formulated the Subculture of Violence thesis, demonstrating that violent crimes—such as assaults and homicides—are deeply embedded within the internalized normative expectations of specific urban underclass milieus, where the resort to physical violence is culturally transmitted as a mandatory code of masculine honor.

C. Theoretical Synthesis: Strain and Differential Association

To build a coherent framework for collective deviance, Cohen skillfully synthesized two major sociological traditions. He incorporated Robert Merton's structural strain premise—that structural inequalities frustrate the attainment of success—while recognizing that Merton could not explain why youth banded together in non-utilitarian delinquency. To resolve this, Cohen integrated Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory, which established that deviant values and behavioral techniques are acquired through communicative social interaction within intimate personal groups (Sutherland & Cressey, 1974). This theoretical cross-fertilization enabled Cohen to explain how individual psychosocial strains are shared, legitimized, and converted into collective, enduring subcultural institutions.

D. Etiological Mechanism: The Middle-Class Measuring Rod and Status Frustration

Cohen asserted that the fundamental crisis confronting working-class youth unfolds when they enter mainstream institutional arenas—preeminently the public school system. Schools are thoroughly dominated by bourgeois functionaries who evaluate and judge all pupils against middle-class standards. Cohen termed this normative benchmark the 'Middle-Class Measuring Rod', which demands ambition, deferral of gratification, long-term planning, emotional self-control, academic diligence, and polished verbal manners (Cohen, 1955).

Working-class boys, raised within familial cultures that emphasize immediate gratification, physical prowess, and collective solidarity, enter the educational arena structurally and culturally ill-equipped to compete on middle-class terms. Consequently, they encounter systematic academic and social failure. This structural debasement generates profound humiliation, creating severe 'Status

Frustration'—a debilitating psychological trauma resulting from their structural incapacity to attain legitimate dignity, self-respect, and recognized status within mainstream societal institutions.

E. Reaction Formation as a Subcultural Engine

Unable to resolve status frustration individually, alienated youth coalesce with peers occupying the identical structural predicament. Through continuous group interaction and mutual resonance, they resolve their collective dilemma by enacting a psychological and sociological defense mechanism known as 'Reaction Formation' (Cohen, 1955). Through reaction formation, the peer collective repudiates middle-class norms entirely, inverting bourgeois values upside-down. Whatever mainstream society valorizes (discipline, respect for property, academic success) is aggressively mocked and desecrated, while behaviors condemned by middle-class morality (aggression, rebelliousness, theft, defiance) are elevated into the highest sources of internal peer prestige and honor.

F. Distinctive Attributes of the Delinquent Subculture

Cohen (1955) identified four qualitative hallmarks that distinguish the delinquent subculture from mainstream culture and rational criminality:

- **Non-Utilitarian:** Deviant acts (e.g., vandalism, spontaneous street fights, window smashing) are rarely undertaken for calculated financial profit; rather, they serve purely expressive, symbolic functions to display defiance and garner intra-group status.
- **Malicious:** Subcultural conduct exhibits active spite, hostility, and cruelty toward mainstream social agents (e.g., teachers, law enforcement officers, respectable citizens), deriving collective enjoyment from humiliating figures of authority.
- **Negativistic:** The gang's morality is fundamentally defined by negation. Rules are not broken as a means to an external end; they are violated precisely because they are established social rules.
- **Versatile and Hedonistic:** The gang resists criminal specialization, engaging fluidly across diverse infractions (theft, fighting, vandalism, truancy) while pursuing immediate sensory excitement and hedonistic thrill with complete disregard for future consequences.

G. Subcultural Transmission and Criminological Explanation

Subcultural theory transcends individual-pathology and biological determinism by locating the genesis of crime in structural inequality and collective meaning-making. Society imposes universal middle-class standards, structurally withholds the requisite cultural capital from the working-class, and systematically humiliates them for failing. The resulting collective status frustration compels

marginalized youth into street aggregations where reaction formation legitimizes alternative moral orders (Cohen, 1955).

In these milieus, delinquency becomes both an end in itself and an indispensable instrument for securing collective validation. Furthermore, as Cloward and Ohlin (1960) articulated, the precise empirical configuration of delinquent subcultures reflects the local ecology of illegitimate opportunities: where organized adult syndicates exist, youths form disciplined criminal subcultures; where community social organization is thoroughly atomized, youths develop violent conflict gangs centered on territorial dominance; and where youth fail across both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures, they withdraw into retreatist subcultures characterized by chronic drug dependency.

3. Methodological and Theoretical Critiques of Subcultural Theory

Despite its paradigm-shifting influence, Cohen's formulation encountered substantive critiques. Steven Box (1981) asserted that the theory overestimates the degree to which lower-class youth originally internalize middle-class success goals, contending that many working-class adolescents display complete indifference toward bourgeois ideals from the outset, developing distinct subcultural values independent of status frustration. Feminist criminologists, notably Meda Chesney-Lind (1989), highlighted the theory's pronounced gender bias: Cohen explicitly dismissed female delinquency as trivial, reducing female transgression exclusively to sexual misconduct and completely overlooking female gang involvement and the unique structural oppressions facing young women.

Moreover, the classical model completely fails to explain middle-class and elite delinquency, such as corporate fraud, political corruption, and white-collar malfeasance, arbitrarily restricting its analytical purview to marginalized underclass males. David Matza (1964) argued that Cohen overstated the permanence and deliberateness of oppositional subcultural values. In *Delinquency and Drift*, Matza demonstrated that most delinquents are not thoroughly committed to a counter-culture, but rather 'drift' between deviance and convention, relying on 'Techniques of Neutralization' (Sykes & Matza, 1957) to periodically suspend moral codes while maintaining underlying respect for mainstream standards.

4. Theoretical Legacy and Analytical Relevance

Notwithstanding these limitations, Cohen's paradigm remains a watershed milestone in the history of sociological criminology. It permanently shifted criminological analysis away from individualized medicalized pathologies toward the group context, ecological structures, and collective social interaction. Critically, it unlocked the sociological puzzle of non-utilitarian, expressive

delinquency that classical utilitarian and strain models could not resolve (Cullen & Agnew, 2011). Consequently, Cohen laid the foundation for decades of subsequent subcultural research, paving the way for contemporary criminological paradigms—such as Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory—which continue to explore the intricate nexus between emotional strain, social marginalization, and deviant behavioral adaptations.

Empirical Application: Deconstructing Neighborhood Gangs in Algeria

The phenomenon of neighborhood gangs in Algeria represents an archetype of contemporary urban delinquency that can be profoundly illuminated through the analytical lens of Subcultural Theory. The Algerian urban landscape exhibits virtually all the structural dislocations, ecological stresses, and cultural dynamics identified by Cohen and subsequent criminologists, intertwined with unique domestic specificities. Over the past decade, Algerian society has experienced an unprecedented escalation in street gang proliferation, compelling public authorities to enact dedicated statutory mechanisms, foremost among which is Presidential Order No. 20-03 of August 30, 2020 (Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024). Field inquiries reveal that this phenomenon, historically alien to Algerian communities on such an organized scale, constitutes a major threat to public order and community stability, especially within new housing developments and sprawling suburban enclaves (Ouabri, 2025; Tadjer, 2025).

1. Structural Preconditions of Gang Formation in Algeria

The etiological drivers of Algerian neighborhood gangs mirror the ecological and subcultural mechanisms theorized in Western sociology, operating through specific localized manifestations (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024). Ecologically, gang expansion has been heavily accelerated by massive state-led urban resettlement programs and rapid residential real estate expansion. These large-scale spatial transformations were accompanied by acute demographic compression, severe overcrowding in peripheral housing estates, a near-total dearth of youth cultural and sports facilities, inadequate community policing infrastructure, and the persistent sprawl of informal settlements that serve as incubators for criminality (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025).

The abrupt rupture of traditional urban fabrics, coupled with stark socioeconomic disparities among residents relocated from disparate urban backgrounds, fractured traditional community surveillance mechanisms. In place of organic social solidarity and neighborhood cohesion, fragmented spaces emerged wherein conflict, territorial rivalries, and subcultural violence supplanted collective trust (Ouabri, 2025; Tadjer, 2025).

2. Status Frustration and the Bourgeois Measuring Rod in Algeria

Cohen's seminal constructs of 'Status Frustration' and the 'Middle-Class Measuring Rod' find immediate resonance within contemporary Algerian realities. Major social institutions—the education system, formal labor markets, and bureaucratic state mechanisms—evaluate youth according to normative criteria that marginalized youth cannot satisfy, given systemic poverty, intergenerational spatial exclusion, and acute deficits in cultural capital (Cohen, 1955). Empirical field investigations confirm that gang formation in Algerian cities is driven not merely by physical spatial deficits, but by deep-seated psychological, social, and economic alienations: chronic youth unemployment, existential despair, bleak future horizons, and systemic barriers to formal socioeconomic integration (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025).

These structural impasses generate severe status frustration among marginalized Algerian youth. Incapacitated from attaining legitimate dignity, economic independence, or social prestige through education and lawful careers, they coalesce into alternative peer formations that provide substitute arenas for recognition, respect, and masculine affirmation—even if attained through illicit transgression (Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024; Tadjer, 2025). This dynamic explains why Algerian neighborhood gangs are overwhelmingly composed of unemployed adolescents and young adults ('Hittistes') who transform the gang into an existential sanctuary from social failure (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Kaddo, 2025).

3. Oppositional Value Codes and Non-Utilitarian Behaviors

Algerian neighborhood gangs adopt normative orientations that directly correspond to Cohen's four subcultural characteristics (non-utilitarian, malicious, negativistic, and versatile). Sociological studies indicate that these formations construct an autonomous subcultural value system wherein violence serves as the primary currency for dispute settlement and prestige accumulation, accompanied by excessive force deployed to destabilize public order and the pervasive consumption of psychotropic drugs as a daily cultural lifestyle (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025).

Crucially, the non-utilitarian nature of their behavior is demonstrated by violent inter-neighborhood clashes and street confrontations with rival groups, which are rarely motivated by calculated economic gain. Instead, they are fought over symbolic dominance, defense of neighborhood 'turf', retaliation for perceived insults, and the pursuit of neighborhood notoriety (Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024; Tadjer, 2025). Furthermore, gang members demonstrate an oppositional versatility, engaging interchangeably in street drug sales, bladed assaults, extortion, public vandalism, and overt defiance of law enforcement authorities (Kaddo, 2025; Ouabri, 2025).

4. Loyalty, In-Group Solidarity, and Status Hierarchy

Uncompromising loyalty to the collective constitutes the supreme moral imperative within Algerian gang subcultures. The gang functions as a surrogate primary family, offering youth an alternative locus of belonging that compensates for dysfunctional domestic or social environments (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025). Studies indicate that the gang addresses profound existential anxieties, providing marginalized youth with fraternal security and emotional validation that outrivals parental influence (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Tadjer, 2025).

This cohesion is anchored in an unyielding normative code, chief among which is the 'Code of Silence' (*Omertà*), strictly prohibiting cooperation with judicial or security authorities. Initiates undergo harrowing tests of courage and physical fortitude, while betrayal is met with severe retaliatory beatings and ostracism (Kaddo, 2025; Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024). Internal prestige is strictly correlated with one's capacity for violence and boldness in confronting rivals or police, reflecting Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) *Subculture of Violence* where status is conferred upon individuals who exhibit fearless combat prowess (Ouabri, 2025).

5. Subcultural Semiotics: Argot, Visual Markers, and Cyber-Spaces

Algerian street gangs have elaborated sophisticated semiotic and linguistic codes that externalize their subcultural identity. In terms of violence, bloody skirmishes featuring bladed weapons, samurai swords, fireworks, and homemade projectiles are recorded and broadcast across social media platforms, serving as theatrical rituals of territorial conquest and masculine intimidation (Kaddo, 2025; Tadjer, 2025). Visually, gangs deploy distinct emblems, specific sartorial styles, unique hairstyles, prison tattoos, and localized wall graffiti to demarcate territorial frontiers and separate allies from adversaries (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Kaddo, 2025).

Linguistically, members utilize highly specialized urban street slang (subcultural *Darja*) and coded hand gestures incomprehensible to outsiders, reinforcing their boundary maintenance and creating an insular sense of clandestine brotherhood (Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024; Ouabri, 2025). Simultaneously, the proliferation of digital platforms—exemplified by Facebook pages such as 'Neighborhood Gangs Watch'—has introduced a paradoxical dynamic: while aiding community surveillance, public exposure across social media often incites retaliatory cycles of public shaming, hardening gang resistance and amplifying inter-neighborhood feuds (Kaddo, 2025; Tadjer, 2025).

Intervention Strategies: Penal Deterrence Versus Social Prevention

In response to the escalation of neighborhood gangs, Algerian public authorities formulated a bifurcated national strategy reconciling penal deterrence with preventative interventions, codified

principally in Presidential Order No. 20-03 of August 30, 2020 (Mekhloufi, 2023; Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024). However, criminological assessments demonstrate that legal deterrence remains fundamentally limited if detached from profound socioeconomic and educational reforms capable of eliminating the structural root causes of youth alienation (Mekhloufi, 2023). Security operations executed during 2025-2026 culminated in the dismantling of 162 neighborhood gangs, the arrest of 861 implicated individuals, and the seizure of 13 million psychotropic tablets alongside 21 tons of treated cannabis resin (Tadjer, 2025). While demonstrating intense operational mobilization, these staggering metrics highlight the structural resilience and persistence of the phenomenon despite rigorous policing (Tadjer, 2025).

1. The Legal and Penal Dimension: Presidential Order No. 20-03

The legislative apparatus balances deterrence and inter-institutional prevention, obligating state entities, civil society organizations, and media apparatuses to coordinate against gang proliferation (Mekhloufi, 2023). Under Order No. 20-03, establishing a neighborhood gang requires a minimum of two individuals, imposing severe custodial sentences of up to 20 years' imprisonment for gang leaders and up to 10 years for active affiliates, with penalties doubled whenever offenses involve weapons, extortion, or physical injury (Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024; Tadjer, 2025). The statute strictly bars convicted gang offenders from presidential pardons and strictly prohibits the illicit importation, manufacture, and commercialization of bladed weapons and machetes (Tadjer, 2025).

Operationally, security organs have deployed specialized anti-gang units, augmented patrols in high-risk zones, utilized aerial and electronic surveillance, and established specialized intelligence units to monitor gang networks (Mekhloufi, 2023; Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024). Nonetheless, criminological consensus affirms that punitive measures manage outward symptoms rather than dismantling the underlying socioeconomic conditions that generate deviance (Ouabri, 2025).

2. The New National Strategy (2026–2029)

Recognizing the insufficiency of unilateral security enforcement, Algerian authorities inaugurated the New National Strategy (2026–2029) under the National Committee for the Prevention and Suppression of Neighborhood Gangs, chaired by the Minister of the Interior (Ouabri, 2025; Tadjer, 2025). This strategic roadmap harmonizes the rule of law with systemic social rehabilitation, transitioning public policy from reactive repression to proactive anticipation via three pillars:

- **Digitalization and Early Warning Systems:** Developing real-time interactive mapping of vulnerable urban districts based on predictive big data analytics, enabling preventative social and security interventions prior to violent escalations (Tadjer, 2025).

- **Pedagogical and Preventive Discourse:** Reframing youth outreach around emotional intelligence and 'Smart Choices', transcending archaic moralizing discourses that alienate disaffected youth, and promoting relatable youth role models (Tadjer, 2025).
- **Institutional Mobilization:** Activating school counseling and psychological listening units, mobilizing Algeria's 26,000 mosques to champion tolerance and civic peace, and expanding sports, artistic, and cultural infrastructures as alternative identity platforms (Ouabri, 2025; Tadjer, 2025).

3. Stratified Public Health Prevention Model

Algeria's multifaceted counter-gang framework can be systematically structured through the Public Health Prevention Triad:

- **Primary Prevention (Universal):** Aimed at the general youth population to avert gang genesis. Includes nationwide media campaigns, school-based civic education, cultural enrichment, and establishing sports facilities to absorb idle youth time, particularly during long summer vacations when gang skirmishes peak (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Tadjer, 2025). Official records confirm that summer represents the pinnacle of gang confrontations, evidenced by the arrest of 436 individuals during the summer holiday season alone (Tadjer, 2025).
- **Secondary Prevention (Targeted):** Directly engages high-risk cohorts—unemployed youth, academic dropouts, and inhabitants of marginalized housing settlements. Encompasses vocational training programs, direct job placement subsidies, targeted psychological support for vulnerable families, and community mediation units to neutralize neighborhood disputes before violence erupts (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025).
- **Tertiary Prevention (Rehabilitative):** Focuses on former offenders and active gang members to prevent recidivism. Comprises vocational training in penitentiary institutions, cognitive-behavioral rehabilitation, addiction treatment for psychotropics, and post-release re-entry support to interrupt the cycle of re-offending (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025).

4. Strategic Deficits and Implementation Obstacles

Despite significant legislative advancements, several systemic deficiencies persist:

- **Disproportionate Reliance on Coercion:** State interventions remain heavily skewed toward policing and judicial prosecution, neglecting structural root causes such as youth underemployment, educational stagnation, and cultural deficits (Mekhloufi, 2023; Ouabri, 2025).

- **Fragmented Inter-Agency Coordination:** Inter-ministerial collaboration among Interior, Education, Youth and Sports, and Social Solidarity sectors requires stronger operational harmonization to execute integrated field programs (Mekhloufi, 2023; Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024).
- **Unintended Media Amplification:** Sensationalist coverage and vigilante social media exposure frequently glorify street combat, foster moral panics, and trigger cyclical retaliatory violence (Kaddo, 2025; Tadjer, 2025).
- **Scarcity of Longitudinal Sociological Data:** Public policies are overwhelmingly driven by immediate police records rather than rigorous, longitudinal criminological and ethnographic research (Ouabri, 2025).

Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations

Subcultural Theory, initiated by Albert K. Cohen and expanded by Cloward, Ohlin, Wolfgang, and Ferracuti, provides an exceptionally powerful paradigm for deconstructing collective juvenile delinquency and neighborhood gangs. By shifting the analytical focus from individualized pathology toward structural strain, peer group dynamics, and oppositional meaning-making, the theory reveals how status frustration—born from systemic educational and socioeconomic exclusion—leads marginalized youth to construct alternative subcultures founded on reaction formation, mutual loyalty, and the normalization of violence (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967).

Applying this framework to the Algerian context elucidates the contemporary surge in neighborhood gangs across metropolitan and newly settled suburbs. Rather than being a spontaneous criminal anomaly, gang proliferation reflects deep-seated structural contradictions: rapid urban expansion, spatial segregation, youth unemployment, the collapse of informal community cohesion, and acute status frustration among disenfranchised youth (Bekhouche & Soukal, 2024; Ouabri, 2025; Tadjer, 2025). These young people coalesce into cohesive street alliances that provide surrogate identities, emotional security, and localized prestige, adopting an oppositional lifestyle characterized by distinct argot, visual markers, and violent territorial rivalry (Rahmani & Hakimi, 2024; Tadjer, 2025).

While the Algerian state has mobilized robust legislative and operational responses through Order No. 20-03 and the National Strategy (2026–2029), punitive measures alone cannot eradicate a phenomenon nurtured by structural marginalization (Mekhloufi, 2023; Ouabri, 2025). A truly comprehensive solution necessitates addressing the socioeconomic roots of youth despair. Based on these findings, the study advances the following actionable recommendations:

1. **Field-Based Criminological Research:** Commission localized ethnographic and longitudinal field studies across diverse Algerian urban districts to identify area-specific catalysts rather than relying exclusively on aggregate security data.
2. **Capital Investment in Youth:** Expand vocational apprenticeships, create viable youth employment conduits, and construct public sports, artistic, and cultural facilities within disenfranchised housing quarters.
3. **Reinvigorating Socialization Institutions:** Strengthen pedagogical listening cells, launch targeted family support services for vulnerable households, and leverage educational curricula and mosque platforms to foster non-violent conflict resolution.
4. **Institutionalizing Community Mediation:** Establish local neighborhood mediation committees composed of respected community elders, social workers, and youth advocates to de-escalate disputes before they erupt into armed street clashes.
5. **Unified Cross-Sectoral Governance:** Establish unified operational protocols binding the Ministries of Interior, Education, Youth and Sports, and Social Solidarity to synchronize youth development policies.
6. **Ethical Media Regulation:** Implement constructive media frameworks to curb sensationalized depictions of gang violence across social media platforms while producing engaging preventative digital content for youth.
7. **Human-Centered Urban Architecture:** Mandate comprehensive sociological impact assessments prior to launching urban housing projects, guaranteeing that new residential complexes integrate ample social infrastructure, public spaces, and security facilities.

Ultimately, resolving the neighborhood gang crisis in Algeria depends upon the collective capacity of the state and civil society to restore social solidarity, rekindle hope among marginalized youth, and build an inclusive social order that affords all citizens genuine pathways to dignity, achievement, and recognition through legitimate institutions. So long as status frustration persists unaddressed, delinquent subcultures will continue to present a compelling alternative—conferring upon alienated youth the identity, brotherhood, and status they are systematically denied elsewhere, even when built upon violence and destruction.

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