

ASU criminologists examine lives of 1950s-era gang members

September 12 2012, by Paul Atkinson



Jackson Square, Roxbury, Mass., in the late 1950s. Credit: Boston Public Library

Rick Moule arrives early to his office in the ASU University Center Building in downtown Phoenix. A doctoral student in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Moule sits in front of his computer and begins reading handwritten notes jotted down by social workers more than 50 years ago.

The notes, on hundreds of pages of faded ledger paper, detail the criminal offenses, arrests and convictions of [gang members](#) from the

Boston neighborhood of Roxbury. Moule is transcribing the notes, building a database that will be analyzed as part of a groundbreaking research project by ASU [criminologists](#).

"There is a lot of front end work to a project like this," said Moule. "It sets the foundation for the research we are conducting."

The research project, "Revisiting Roxbury: Crime, Gang Membership and the Life Course," was recently awarded a \$350,000 grant from the National Science Foundation. Scott Decker, director of the ASU School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, applied for the grant with assistant professor Jacob Young and associate professor Gary Sweeten.

"We're really excited to have National Science Foundation funding," said Decker. "An NSF award is regarded as one of the most competitive and prestigious research grants in the U.S."

The study will use data collected from the first nationally funded gang outreach program, conducted in the mid-1950s. Led by noted [cultural anthropologist](#) Walter Miller, a team of social workers tracked the day-to-day experiences of 481 young men and women involved in seven gangs in the Roxbury neighborhood located a few miles south of Fenway Park. The program was the outgrowth of a community effort to combat a growing juvenile crime problem and lasted three years. The goal was to redirect gang members into more constructive activities.

But results from the gang outreach project were never published. And a book written by Miller on the Roxbury gangs, "City Gangs," remained in manuscript form after a disagreement with a publisher over its page length. When Miller passed away in 2004, a colleague sought out a proper home for his materials. Scott Decker, a leading gang researcher, was selected to receive the 11 boxes of documents. They contained Miller's notes and manuscript, almost 80,000 contact cards used by

social workers to document the daily lives of gang members, hundreds of newspaper clippings, and the faded ledger sheets used by Moule.

The materials arrived at ASU in 2006. Decker had a team of doctoral students inventory and sort the boxes. He also had Miller's manuscript, more than 900 typed pages and 100 mostly handwritten tables, reproduced from the light weight onion paper used by Miller into a digital document. The 948-page book, "City Gangs," was published online in 2011.

In the forward to the book, Decker wrote that the book "is more than an interesting historical curiosity; it is a study of gangs and urban culture whose findings and insights remain instructive today."

But publishing Miller's book was just the beginning for Decker

He and two professors in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice proposed a follow-up study using the treasure trove of data collected by Miller's team in the 1950s. The new research project would involve collecting and analyzing criminal records of the 481 individuals involved in the original gang study. Follow-up interviews with a sample of 50 to 60 former gang members would be conducted to better understand how joining and leaving a gang influenced later life course behaviors including marriage, college, careers and crime.

And the contact cards produced by Roxbury social workers would be analyzed to determine how the social networks of gang members contributed to their actions.

"A social worker followed them around and recorded events that occurred," said Jacob Young, an assistant professor in the ASU School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. "So, if they went to the movie, 'this was who was there, this is kind of what happened.'"

Young says the contact cards detailed when fights and other events occurred, and helped Miller and his team track the interactions gang members had with institutions over the life of the gang outreach program. Young will use new developments in statistical analysis to help explain the role social networks played in the lives of the one-time gang members.

"So what you can do is link people through these cards and create a network of people's affiliations," Young said. "The goal is to look at how those networks have changed over those three years and see if people's affiliations help explain why some have left the gang, why it was easier for some to get out of these situations, and why some people may have been stuck in gangs.

Interviews with a sample group of former gang members who are now in their early 70s will be conducted by Decker, who recently traveled to Boston to review yearbooks and school records. Decker says the sample includes a number of people who have spent considerable time in prison, as well as police officers, a practicing physician, and a mathematics professor.

"For me, one of the things that makes the project so distinctive is that we're going to go back and interview approximately 50 to 60 men and women who were involved in gangs in the 1950s and get in their own words their own story – what it meant to be a gang member and how they moved beyond or progressed from the [gang membership](#)."

Finding out what happened to those involved in the original gang study falls on Gary Sweeten, who is collecting school records, marriage records, employment records and criminal records.

"My big job with these data is to construct data sets, construct our longitudinal data set," said Sweeten. "And so I'll be doing that kind of

quantitative analysis if we can track down marriage records and all this information that we need."

For Sweeten, the chance to work on the Roxbury research project is special. One of his mentors at the University of Maryland, John Laub, co-authored a landmark study tracing the criminal life course of hundreds of Boston men from their years as juvenile delinquents in the 1940s to their senior years a half century later.

"To have the opportunity to work on that type of project to track down old gang members that are also from Boston, that's a great opportunity," Sweeten said. "So, I'm excited to build these data sets and get to work analyzing the data."

Sweeten notes the new study contains something that Laub and his colleague Robert Sampson didn't have in their data set: variation. Laub and Sampson examined data from white males. The Roxbury gang outreach program included individuals from one African-American male gang, one African-American female gang, and one female white gang.

"So that's exciting to have variation in demographics," Sweeten said.

One of the things that researchers want to find out is the role of agency or making good decisions despite considerable odds that were against the one-time gang members.

"Too much of criminology I think depicts individuals like a leaf in the wind – they are blown one way or the other and they don't have much to say about it," Decker said. "There is emerging work that underscores the role of agency. And we hope by having their story to lay against the official records – whether it's their criminal records, school records, military records, family, marriage – that we'll be able to better hone in on the role of agency."

Decker expects results from the new study will be published in a couple years. Findings from the original study of Roxbury gangs can be found at gangresearch.asu.edu. The website also features the latest [gang](#) research from the ASU School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Provided by Arizona State University

Citation: ASU criminologists examine lives of 1950s-era gang members (2012, September 12)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2012-09-asu-criminologists-1950s-era-gang-members.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.