

The book "Vice Lords; Warriors of the Streets," is the presentation of an ethnographic study concerning the African American gang lifestyle that dominated Chicago's West side during the late 1950s and early 1960s. R. Lincoln Keiser gives his findings through an intense series of interviews and observations centered on The Vice Lords, arguably the most prominent of such gangs. By uncovering the social, linguistic, environmental, and economic practices of this powerful association, Keiser provides a glimpse into a culture few understand. In doing so, he reveals that gang life is not defined by the savage criminal activities that stereotypes imply, but a rich brotherhood with complex codes of conduct.

Perhaps the best example of this complexity is the leadership hierarchy that Keiser attempts to explain. The Vice Lords, who were associated with the area around 16th Street and Lawndale Avenue, began as a social group interested hosting community parties, or "sets." As other West Side gangs began committing crimes in the area, however, they were forced to defend their territory. As Vice Lord activities and numbers grew, an intricate leadership hierarchy emerged. The President of Vice Lord nation was at the top of this hierarchy, and it was he who made all the major decisions concerning gang wars. He was followed by the war counselors, who were responsible for rallying troops, creating battle plans, and leading the charge. The vice president existed solely for the purpose of replacing the president if he were shot or arrested. This prevented the confusion or competition of a power gap. Lastly there were branch presidents who operated the different subgroups of Vice Lords throughout the West Side.