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Youth Gangs:
An Overview of Key Findings and Directions for the Future

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ABSTRACT

Youth gangs have received considerable attention for many decades. Undoubtedly, their disproportionate involvement in violence is one main reason for this attention. While gang members spend most of their lives engaging in the same types of behaviors as other youth (sleeping, eating, playing video games, going to school), they are also much more likely than non-gang members to be involved in violence and other criminal activity. Indeed, scholars have often highlighted the *functional* nature of violence as it pertains to gangs.

Gangs come in a variety of forms: prison gangs, outlaw motorcycle gangs, extremist groups, and drug trafficking organizations, among others. The current essay summarizes what is known about youth gangs. This is done for two primary reasons. First, gangs differ across types. Second, more research has been conducted on youth gangs than any other gang type. So, in order to keep the topic both manageable and empirically sound, what we know about youth gangs is highlighted here.

INTRODUCTION

Youth gangs have received considerable attention by scholars, practitioners, and the general public for quite some time. As of 2009, it was estimated that there were approximately 28,100 youth gangs with 731,000 youth gang members in the United States (Egley & Howell, 2011)¹. Additionally, gangs were found to be present in various locales—large, urban areas; suburban counties; and even rural areas (Egley & Howell, 2011). But how did we get here? What does the “gang problem” actually encompass? Given the enormous public attention

¹ This chapter is focused on what we know about “youth gangs.” When relevant, I will make reference to adult gangs. Given the divergent findings of studies of youth and adult gang characteristics, activities, and risk factors for involvement, however, it is important to limit the scope of the discussion.

focused on the “gang problem,” is there any hope for improvement? We think there is reason for hope and attempt to illustrate promising avenues by synthesizing gang research in the current chapter.

It is certainly possible to trace the evolution of gang research. From a research standpoint, we see attention on gangs has waxed and waned over time. Curry and Decker (2003) highlighted four major periods of concerns about youth gangs. The earliest period in the United States was 1870, corresponding with increased immigration into large cities (Curry and Decker, 2003). Additional periods of gang concern occurred in the 1890s and 1920s (Curry and Decker, 2003). Interestingly, the gangs of these early periods died out without formal intervention. The 1960s represented the “third wave” of gang problems in America. This period differed from previous gang “outbreaks” and had a lasting effect.

Interestingly, a review by Bookin-Weiner and Horowitz (1983) highlighted that gang research was “in favor” during the 1950s-1960s, but relatively absent in the 1970s. Indeed, this review led them to question whether gang problems had truly subsided, or whether the lack of gang research represented a period when scholars turned their attention to other topics (Bookin-Weiner & Horowitz, 1983).

Gang research made a comeback, though, shortly after Bookin-Weiner and Horowitz (1983) raised their questions. A resurgence of gang activity occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, leading to a new flurry of gang-related research—particularly ethnographies of individual gangs or experiences of a few members or surveys of gang and non-gang involved youth—came into fashion and remains relevant today. As will be discussed later, these divergent

methodologies often presented very different pictures of gangs and gang membership. It was clear, however, that gangs were still present and gang members were still active.

During the late-1980s through mid-1990s, attention focused on a new “youth violence epidemic” (Cook & Laub, 1998). A flurry of news stories and popular culture (e.g., movies like *Colors* and “gangster rap”) began focusing on violence purportedly committed by youth gang members in efforts to establish gang territory. During this period, a new picture emerged, often bolstered by reports by law enforcement officials, that new “supergangs” such as the Bloods and Crips were spreading out of Los Angeles to establish satellite drug markets in other areas across the country. The new availability of a cheap, highly potent form of cocaine—named “crack”—was contemporaneously being sold in poor, inner-city neighborhoods. These were often the neighborhoods where gangs also flourished. Often, the “youth violence epidemic” was attributed to inter-gang battles—often involving firearms—over prime drug dealing territories. Beginning in the mid-1980s, then, gangs, violence, and drugs became almost inextricably linked in the public consciousness and among some researchers (e.g., Blumstein, 1996). This opened the spigot to a number of important uses of federal funds for studying—and hopefully eradicating—the “youth gang problem.”

At the tail end of the “youth violence epidemic,” one important new source of information about gangs was institutionalized. Since 1996, the National Youth Gang Survey has collected systematic estimates of law enforcement records of gangs and gang membership on an annual basis. Agency records are by no means perfect, but the systematic collection of data over more than a decade provides a reasonable degree of confidence in the NYGS findings. Findings from the NYGS illustrate three distinct trends in the prevalence in gangs in the United States: 1) there was a steep decrease from the mid-1990s until 2001, 2) an upsurge between 2001 and 2005,

and 3) a period of relative stability since 2005 (Egley & Howell, 2011). Although the attention of the nation has turned towards fear of terrorism since 2001, it is clear that gangs remain a pressing issue to study.

The current chapter provides an overview of what we know about youth gangs and youthful gang members. The focus is on describing the historical evolution of gang research, key findings about gangs and their members, and a direction for future research. Throughout this chapter, efforts to inform effective policy and practice—under the broad umbrella of prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts—are linked to findings of key studies. The hope is that this chapter is useful to academics and practitioners alike.

Definitional Issues

Like other social phenomena, it is often difficult to precisely define the concept of interest. This is, however, a necessary element of any serious discussion. Thus, we begin by exploring three key definitions:

--What is a gang?

--What is gang activity and gang crime?

--Who is a gang member?

The answers to these three questions are not as straightforward as a casual examination would suggest. These questions are particularly important, however, as they shape the nature and character of what we can refer to as the larger “gang problem.” Equally important is that successful “evidence-based” practices hinge upon accurate definition and measurement.

What is a Gang?

There is no national uniform definition of what constitutes a “gang.” Different jurisdictions use different definitions, making it difficult to succinctly answer the question of “what is a gang?” Additionally, scholars have debated the criteria necessary to distinguish a “peer friendship group” from a “gang.”

Research on gangs has often relied on five major criteria: 1) a *group* (i.e., more than two people) who 2) is viewed (by themselves and/or others) as being *distinct from other groups*, 3) that have a degree of *permanence*, 4) have methods of *communication* (e.g., signs, symbols, colors), and 5) are *involved in criminal activity*. The most controversial criteria—involvement in criminal activities—is generally thought to be a necessary component to distinguish gangs from more prosocial groups such as Boy/Girl Scouts, fraternity/sorority members, and members of the armed forces. Including this criterion, however, essentially guarantees that gangs will be found to be more involved in crime and delinquency than non-gang groups (see Short, 1990).

The National Youth Gang Survey uses the definition of “a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a ‘gang.’” Importantly, their definition excludes motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, and prison gangs because these are more likely to be comprised of adults. Respondents’ reports are open to their discretion of different groups being classified as gangs.

The Eurogang Program of Research has provided an alternative definition that has been gaining considerable credence as a definition of a youth street gangs. According to the Eurogang definition, youth street gangs can be defined as “any durable, street oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein & Maxson, 2006: 4). While

the Eurogang Program of Research has led to some very interesting findings, it started slowly. As an aside, rumor has it that there was initial reluctance on the part of Europeans to admit that they had gangs because they were not like those gangs found in Los Angeles or Chicago. The Americans in attendance replied, "Neither do we." This short exchange broke the ice and led to an ongoing partnership between Europeans and Americans in studies of gang issues.

Gang Typologies

Youth gangs are not monolithic. The humorous exchange between the Europeans and Americans contained considerable truth. While there have been several gang typologies proposed dating back to the work of Thrasher (1927), we focus on a more recent typology developed by Maxson and Klein (1995). Their typology was based on law enforcement's reports of the gang with which they were the most familiar. Based on these responses, Maxson and Klein created a typology based on six main criteria: the presence of subgroups, size, age range of members, duration of existence, territoriality, and crime versatility. Based upon these criteria, five types of gangs were identified. *Traditional* gangs are the ones that most people think about. Traditional gangs are classified as having many members, subgroups based on age or other criteria, a broad age range, existing for a long period of time, claim territory, and engage in a wide variety of crime types. Although these are the types of gangs which often capture public concern, these are the least common type of gangs. The second type of gang is known as *neotraditional*. Neotraditional gangs are similar to traditional gangs in terms of subgroups, territory, and crime versatility; they differ, however, in terms of size (they are smaller), age range of members (they may be small or large), and duration (they are around for shorter periods of time). Over time, neotraditional gangs may become traditional gangs. The third type of gangs is *compressed* gangs. Compressed gangs have no subgroups, are small in size, have narrow age

ranges, are in existence for short periods of time, do not claim territory, but are versatile in their criminal activity. It appears that compressed gangs are the most common types of gangs operating in the United States. The fourth type of gangs is *collective* gangs. Collective gangs have no subgroups, are medium to large in size, have a medium-to-large age range of members, are around for medium duration, do not claim territory, and are involved in a variety of criminal activity. The final type of gangs according to Maxson and Klein are known as *speciality* gangs. Specialty gangs have no subgroups, have few members, have a narrow age range, are short in duration, claim territory, but specialize in certain types of criminal behavior. The most commonly understood speciality gangs are drug dealing and/or party gangs.

It is important to understand the type(s) of gang(s) operating in any area. Denying the existence of gangs—which is a common strategy by practitioners at early stages of gang identification (Huff, 1998)—can lead to more formalized gang structures. However, policy responses that treat all types of gangs in the same manner can actually lead to more cohesive and/or organized gangs as responses are viewed as a form of threat. (This will be discussed below). In short, effective anti-gang strategies should begin with a good understanding of what types of gangs are operating in a given locale and strategies should be developed to deal with those specific types of gangs.

What is Gang Activity and Gang Crime?

As is true with defining what constitutes a gang, there are disagreements about what constitutes “gang activity” or “gang crime.” From a practical standpoint, different jurisdictions use different definitions. This definitional distinction is present in the two largest American “gang cities.” Los Angeles, California, has traditionally used what is known as a “gang member-

based” definition. Accordingly, all crimes that involve a gang member are classified as gang crimes. Conversely, Chicago, Illinois, has traditionally used what is known as a “gang motivated-based” definition. Under this approach, only crimes which are committed to further the interests of the gangs are recorded as gang crimes. A study by Maxson and Klein (1990) found that the different definitional issues affected the prevalence of gang homicide in each city, but did not dramatically change that nature of the circumstances associated with the crimes. Thus, Maxson and Klein (1990) argue that different definitions may affect the scope of the gang problem, but do little to change the nature of gang problems.

Unfortunately, we have little national-level information about gang crime. Information collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s *Uniform Crime Reports*, *National Incident-Based Reporting System*, and *Supplemental Homicide Reports* provide little guidance as they collect and report information haphazardly. A more systematic recording and reporting of gang crimes in these sources would be incredibly helpful in understanding the nature of criminal activities committed by gang members. This is unlikely to happen anytime soon, however, as these programs are based on local law enforcement data collection practices—many of which do not collect gang information in any systematic fashion (Katz & Webb, 2006).

Who is a Gang Member?

The simple answer to this question may at first glance seem to be that a gang member is any individual involved in gang activities. This, however, is not sufficient. As we have discussed, it is often difficult to gain consensus on what constitutes “gang activity” or “gang crime.” Additionally, such a definition fails to delineate gradations of gang membership.

Esbensen and colleagues (2001) conducted an interesting exercise to demonstrate the importance gang definitions make on the scope and nature of gang problems. Using data collected from nearly 6,000 eighth-grade youth attending public schools in 11 diverse U.S. cities, they employed increasingly restrictive definitions of gang membership to see how they affected the prevalence of gang membership and the characteristics of gang members. The first definition of gang membership was simply the response (affirmative or negative) to the question, “Have you ever been a gang member?” The second definition was similar, consisting of the response, “Are you now in a gang?” Definitions three through five were increasingly restrictive: definition three added gang involvement in *crime/delinquency*², definition four added a degree of *organization*³, and definition five added a measure of *embeddedness*⁴. Their findings indicated considerable divergence in the prevalence of gang membership (from 2 percent of the youth using the most restrictive definition to 17 percent of the youth using the least restrictive definition). Consistent with expectations, the “core” members of “organized delinquent gangs” had the most antisocial attitudes and most extensive involvement in delinquency. Equally important, however, was the finding that different definitions presented slightly different demographic patterns of gang youth. Contrary to expectations that more restrictive definitions would reveal patterns more in line with studies based on ethnographic methods or police data (e.g., males of minority group status), moving from the least to most restrictive definition, gang

² *Crime/delinquency* was a measure indicating whether the respondent’s gang was involved in at least one of the following: getting in fights with other gangs, stealing things, robbing other people, stealing cars, selling marijuana, selling other illegal drugs, or damaging property.

³ *Organization* was a measure indicating whether the respondent’s gang had initiation rites, established leaders, or symbols or colors.

⁴ *Embeddedness* was a measure indicating whether the respondent considered him-/herself a “core” or “peripheral” member of the gang.

members were increasingly female and White. It is important to note, however, that the most salient differences were between those who reported currently being in a gang versus all other definitions. Drawing on these findings, the authors concluded that self-nomination as a current gang member was a valid measure of gang membership.

Similarly, Curry, Decker, and Egley (2002) used a sample of middle school students in St. Louis, Missouri, to determine how behaviors varied across different gradations of gang membership status. They were interested in 1) gang members, 2) gang affiliates, and 3) non-gang youth. 15 percent of youth in their study were classified as ever or currently being gang members. Perhaps most important were the findings that a significant proportion of youth (57%) reported some degree of gang involvement⁵, even if they claimed they had never been gang members.

What do Gang Members Look Like?

A considerable amount of research has examined the racial/ethnic characteristics of gang members. What gang members “look like” often depends on which type of research methodology is used. Biographies and journalistic accounts typically portray gang members as racial/ethnic minority youth, of lower socioeconomic status, raised in single parent families (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Police statistics typically present a similar characterization. This picture of gang youth is probably not surprising, as gangs are typically comprised of the most marginalized members of society. Indeed, some scholars—such as Vigil (1988)—have argued that youth join gangs because they are “multiply marginalized”—they develop problematic self-

⁵ Gang involvement was indicated by responses to questions about having friends in gangs, wearing gang colors, hanging out with gang members, or flashing gang signs.

identities as part of their socialization to the street—which is often the main source of socialization in the most disadvantaged areas.

Yet the notion that most gang youth come from minority backgrounds is open to debate. Not all minority youth are marginalized and minority youth are not the only youth to be marginalized. (Note Wilson’s (1987) work highlighting the rise of an upwardly mobile Black middle class during the 1970s and 1980s.) Additionally, an innovative study conducted by Esbensen and Lynskey (2001) examined the race/ethnicity of gang members in a school survey in 11 diverse U.S. cities. Their results indicated that the gang members in each city were of the same background as other residents of the cities examined. In other words, cities with high proportions of Black residents (like Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) had high proportions of Black gang members, cities with high proportions of Hispanic residents (such as Las Cruces, New Mexico) had high proportions of Hispanic gang members, and cities with high proportions of White residents (such as Pocatello, Idaho) had high proportions of White gang members. The point here is not to minimize the experiences of gang members from racial/ethnic minority groups, but to highlight that the “picture” of gang membership is not universal across settings.

The Development of Gangs

With the caveat that it is difficult to develop universally-valid definitions of gangs, gang activity/crime, and gang membership, we now turn our attention to theories of gang formation. In other words, how and why do gangs develop?

Theories of Gang Development

One may wonder why it is important to explore how gangs develop. After all, we have already seen that gangs have existed for a long period of time. Yet this overshadows the

relatively recent upsurge in gang activity in suburban counties, small cities, and rural areas. We argue that it is critically important to understand how gangs develop so that communities that are seeing gang-like behavior can take effective actions to prevent full-scale gang behavior. One of the earliest attempts to understand gangs was written in 1927 by Frederick Thrasher. His book, *The Gang: 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, is filled with descriptions of gangs operating in Chicago during that time. According to Thrasher (1927), gangs developed as a natural evolution of youth friendship groups. These groups grew up together, engaged in “play fighting,” and were ultimately united through conflict.

Although it was conducted nearly a century ago, many of Thrasher’s propositions hold true today. First, gangs develop in local settings. It is not uncommon to hear that gang members migrate across the country to search for prime drug dealing territory, but this has received very little empirical support. Maxson (1993; 1998) has conducted the best research on the topic and has consistently reported that migration for establishing drug territory is a “myth” (see also Hagedorn, 1998). In other words, most gangs are “homegrown” and typically neighborhood-based. Additionally, these neighborhood-based groups share experiences during their lives and develop strong friendship ties. According to Thrasher, it is when violence or the threat of violence occurs that these groups are likely to transform into gangs.

Klein (1971) discussed the importance of “mythic violence” in fostering gang cohesiveness. Klein argued that actual violence is less common in gang life than commonly believed. What is more common is what he refers to as “mythic violence.” Gang members spend a considerable amount of time telling and re-telling “war stories” about their experiences with violence. Throughout these discussions, gang members learn to control their fear in the

face of violent events when they occur and also to rely on their fellow gang members for protection.

Similarly, Decker (1996) proposes that *threat* of violence is the main factor distinguishing gangs from other youth groups. The sense that violence can occur at any time presents a degree of hyperawareness among gang members. Violence can also be used in initiation rituals, to sanction rule violations, and to enact revenge against rival gang members. Each of these promotes a sense of camaraderie and control within the gang setting. In short, violence is deemed to be the most important factor that differentiates gangs from other delinquent groups.

Risk Factors for Gang Membership

So why do youth join gangs? It is not uncommon for the media or law enforcement personnel to report that gangs recruit members, often in unique ways. For example, social media websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube have been implicated in recruiting gang members and facilitating gang activities (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2012). While the jury is still out on the degree to which this is true, research by Scott Decker (2012; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011) calls this into question. His research found that gang members—like others of similar age groups—spent a reasonable amount of time online. However, using the internet for criminal purposes was rare: 10 percent of gang members reported harassing someone, eight percent attacked someone because of something said/done online, and seven percent posted videos of fights on YouTube. Let's keep this in perspective, though: 26 percent reported illegally downloading software or media. In short, there is little evidence that social networking sites play a critical role in youth gang activity.

It is informative to examine risk factors for gang joining. Klein and Maxson (2006) have conducted the most extensive reviews of risk factors for gang membership. Their study collated findings from 20 studies which identified risk factors in the individual, family, peer, school, and neighborhood domains. Studies included represented a wide range of methodological rigor; they included cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, representative and non-representative samples, and bivariate and multivariate analyses were employed.

Klein and Maxson's (2006) review found that most of the risk factors examined had received "inconclusive" support; additionally, risk factors from the individual, family, and peer domains were more often examined than risk factors in the school or neighborhood domains. Factors to receive the most support were: 1) negative life events, nondelinquent problem behaviors; and characteristics of peer networks (all were reported as consistently supported). Delinquent beliefs, parental supervision, and affective dimensions of peer networks were "mostly" supported. Internalizing behaviors, involvement in conventional activities, attitudes towards the future, harsh parenting practices, family deviance, school commitment/educational aspirations, parental attachment, academic achievement, and area crime measures were each classified as "inconclusive." Some other factors received even less support. Self-esteem, poverty, single parent families, family attachment, unsafe school environment, and criminogenic neighborhood factors were mostly not supported as risk factors for gang joining.

The reasons why youth join gangs appear to be as diverse as gang members themselves. While motivations for joining vary, individuals often note they were either *pulled* or *pushed* into membership. Some discuss being pulled into the gang because of the attractions they believed membership would afford them. Often joiners believe the gang offers the promise of friends, social activities, and ways to make money. Still others feel as if they were pushed into

membership; fearing that to not join would lead to harassment or victimization. Within the first evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program, middle school and high school aged youth indicated that they joined their gang for protection, fun, respect, money, and because a friend was already in the gang (Esbensen et al., 1999; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). Similar findings have been found in the Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry et al., 2003) as well as other ethnographic research conducted with gang members across the U.S. (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Miller, 2001a; 2001b; Padilla, 1992).

The Experiences of Gang Members

Most youth will not become actively involved with gangs. Those who do, however, may find their gang experience to be an important turning point in their lives (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). Periods of gang membership are commonly linked with elevated rates of violence and substance use. The more a youth socializes in the gang context increases the amount of time (s)he is exposed to anti-social norms and behaviors. Additionally, the gang context exposes youth to motivated offenders and lowers capable guardianship. Threats of violence (real or perceived) are also important elements of the “gang lifestyle.”

Gang members have been found to be involved in more general delinquent offending, violent offending, and violent victimization than their non-gang peers. Indeed, this is one of the most “robust” of all criminological findings (Thornberry et al., 2003). Yet there are various perspectives as to why this finding holds. We next briefly turn to a discussion of three major perspectives on why the link between gang membership and violence appears so robust.

Selection, Facilitation, and Enhancement Models

There is no question that violence is an important part of gangs. One key question that remains unresolved in the gang literature, however, is whether increased violence is due to individual propensities for violence among gang members, a criminogenic effect of the gang/group context on violence, or a combination of the two. In other words, is there evidence of “selection effects,” “facilitation effects,” or “enhancement effects?”

Thornberry and colleagues (1993) and Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) were among the first to examine these issues. Using interview data collected from youth residing in high-risk neighborhoods in Rochester, New York (Thornberry et al., 1993), and Denver, Colorado, (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993), efforts were made to disentangle *selection*, *social facilitation*, and *enhancement* models of gangs and violence. *Selection* models hold that increased rates of gang violence are due to the fact that gang members have an increased propensity to engage in violence, regardless of whether they are in a gang. This model assumes that gang members will be violent offenders, even without being exposed to gangs. No causal relationship between gangs and violence should be observed because gangs are simply collectives of violent individuals. Conversely, *social facilitation* models suggest that it is the group context of the gang—not individual members’ propensity for violence—that is the true culprit. This model hypothesizes that gang members will be involved in no more violence than non-gang youth prior to joining a gang or after leaving a gang; periods of gang membership, however, should see higher rates of violence for gang members relative to their non-gang peers. The third model, *enhancement*, may be viewed as a middle-ground. This model hypothesizes that gang members may be more violent than non-gang members prior to joining and/or after leaving (consistent with the selection model). The greatest divergence, however, should be during periods in which youth are gang involved (consistent with the facilitation model).

Research examining these three models has found more support for the facilitation model, relative to the selection model. That is, it appears that the gang context is responsible for the increased violence exhibited by youth gang members relative to their non-gang peers. These differences appear to be linked to two theoretical perspectives: 1) routine activities of youth and 2) the functional utility of violence in gangs.

Routine activity theory suggests that crime—including violence—occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets that lack capable guardianship. In their study of violent victimization among gang and non-gang youth, Taylor and colleagues (2008) applied routine activities theory to postulate that gangs provided settings where exposure and proximity to high risk situations abound. Specifically, gang members were viewed as suitable targets—often having money, drugs, or guns that others desired—or being the targets of retaliatory violence from other gangs (see also Taylor et al., 2007; Taylor, 2008). Guardianship is lower for gang members, as they are more likely than non-gang members to spend time hanging out with peers without adults present, particularly in situations where drugs and alcohol are available.

Additionally, violence has been found to be *functional* in youth gangs. Specifically, violence—or the *threat*—of violence has been found to increase youth gang solidarity (Thrasher, 1927; Klein, 1971; Decker, 1996). The feeling that violence could erupt at any moment, coupled with the belief that gang youth can only rely on other members of their gang for protection, can increase gang cohesiveness. The threat can be real or “mythic,” transmitted and reinforced through “war stories” about previous violent confrontations. The perceived aggressors may be members of rival gangs, law enforcement, or anyone viewed as threatening to the gang’s existence.

Two studies have examined the importance of Elijah Anderson's (1999) concept of the code of the streets as it relates to gang membership. The first study was conducted by Melde, Taylor, and Esbensen (2009) who sought to determine how fear of violent victimization, perceived risk of violent victimization, and actual violent victimization changed before, during, and after gang membership. The findings illustrated that joining a gang resulted in less fear of victimization, but greater perceived risk and actual victimization among members. The authors concluded that gang members must display "heart" or "nerve" in the face of danger, which is consistent with what Anderson states. In other words, while gang members recognized that they were at increased risk of violent victimization, they also knew that they were supposed to face threats without fear.

A second study examined whether adherence to the code of the street could mediate the link between gang membership and involvement in violent offending was conducted by Matsuda and colleagues (Forthcoming). Their study found that: 1) gang membership enhanced belief in violence associated with the code of the streets, and 2) these beliefs in the use of violence to gain and maintain respects was, indeed, a significant mediator of the relationship between gang membership and violence. In short, these authors found that gang members' beliefs in the elements of street code-related violence was a primary reason why gang membership is associated with increased violence.

Time of Entry and Exit

Surveys and interviews of youth have found a promising fact: most youth gang members are gang involved for a relatively short duration. Results from longitudinal studies of youth conducted in Rochester, New York (Thornberry et al., 2003), Denver, Colorado (Esbensen &

Huizinga, 1993), Seattle, Washington (Gordon et al., 2004), and a host of other U.S. sites (Esbensen et al., 2010; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004) have found that gang youth are in a gang for approximately one year. The fact that gang membership is far from a permanent condition provides considerable reason for optimism among those who are striving to get current gang members out of their gangs.

What about Girls in Gangs?

The connection between gender and gangs has been a hotly debated issue. The first issue is the representation of girls within youth gangs. Official estimates garnered from police place the percentage of gang members who are female at 10 percent or less (National Youth Gang Center, 2009). (Males, conversely, comprise 90 percent or more of gang members). Estimates gathered through self-reports, however, indicate that girls comprise somewhere between 30 – 50 percent of all gang members (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001).

In addition to disagreements concerning estimates of the percentage of gang members who are female, there is also debate as to the degree to which female gang members are involved in gang-related delinquent and violent activities. Traditionally, girl gang members were viewed as being only peripherally involved in gang-related crime. Esbensen and colleagues' (1999) review of the literature indicated that most research had classified gang girls as “tomboys” or “sex objects.” In short, girls in gangs traditionally have not been viewed as being as serious a problem as boys in gangs.

More recent research on girls in gangs, however, has called into question the results from earlier research. Data from self-report surveys reported by Esbensen and Winfree (1998), for

example, indicate that gang girls are more involved in delinquency and violence than are non-gang girls and non-gang boys (but not to the degree of male gang members). Additionally, ethnographic work reported by Jody Miller (2001a; 2001b) confirms that female gang members are involved in delinquency and violence in a greater degree than that suggested by earlier research. Also consistent were the findings that girl gang members were found to be less involved in these activities than were gang boys. Miller's work suggested that these differential levels of involvement in delinquency and violence were due to norms about appropriate gender roles. Girls lesser involvement was due to two different processes. On the one hand, girls were able to play on gender roles to avoid the most serious types of offending. On the other hand, boys often used gender roles to prevent girls from being involved in the most serious types of offending. In short, gender plays an important role in the experiences and behaviors of youth gang members.

Exiting Gangs

Gang membership is predominately a fleeting youth experience. Several longitudinal youth studies (e.g., the Denver Youth Study, Pittsburgh Youth Study, Rochester Youth Development Study, and the Seattle Social Development Project) have demonstrated that membership typically peaks around early to mid-adolescence and most gang joiners leave within one year or less (Gordon et al., 2004; Thornberry et al., 2003). These findings suggests that for many individuals, gang affiliation is as transitory an experience as is involvement in other non-gang adolescent youth groups (Decker & Curry, 2000; Warr, 2002). On the whole, relatively little is known about who gang leavers are as well as why and how they desist from gangs. What has been established is that: 1) they do desist (again, typically after approximately one year of

participation), 2) desistance is motivated by a range of factors, and 3) members most commonly leave their gang through informal means with little or no consequences.

With almost all members eventually leaving their gang, this raises questions about the timing of desistance. Specifically, the questions of what the primary motivations for leaving are and, to some degree, who are the youth most likely to desist earlier than others? While research has found disproportionate involvement of minority youth in gangs, the likelihood of desisting from gang involvement is relatively consistent across different racial and ethnic groups (Thornberry et al., 2003). However, gang leaving does appear to be strongly influenced by one important demographic characteristic: gender. Females appear to join and leave their gang at an earlier age than do their male counterparts (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003). Beyond demographic characteristics, youth who are less embedded in their gang (e.g., peripheral or fringe members compared to core members) are more apt to leave their gang more quickly and with fewer repercussions (Horowitz, 1983; Thornberry et al., 2003; Vigil, 1988).

With an understanding of who earlier gang leavers are, why then are these members motivated to leave their gang? Most of what is known about gang leavers is based on ethnographic research conducted with current and former gang members. Overall, this research has found that former members indicate the importance of a wide variety of factors in their decision to leave. What's more, the desire to leave the gang can either build gradually over time or can be abruptly sparked by a particularly salient experience.

While protection is one of the most commonly found motivations for joining a gang, exposure to violence and victimization is a paradoxically common factor which motivates gang desistance. Decker and Lauritsen's (2002) research with current and former members in St.

Louis, Missouri, found exposure to violence to be one of the most discussed motivators for gang desistance (see also Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Peterson, 2012; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Their work demonstrated that some members were motivated by a single and severe violent victimization while others were gradually worn down by an accumulation of violent experiences throughout their period of affiliation (see also Vigil, 1988). For these former members, direct and vicarious experiences with violence, as well as a desire to prevent future victimization, directly motivated their desire to leave the gang.

Other members have left their gang because of other gang and life experiences. This includes growing disinterested in gang activities and other members, growing interest in non-gang peers and other prosocial activities, as well as moving to a new school or city (see Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Peterson, 2012; Vigil, 1988). Research with older members has found that experiences like graduating high school, getting a good job, having a child, and getting married motivated other members to leave their gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hagedorn & Devitt, 1999; Vigil, 1988). For many, these experiences not only motivated a desire to leave gang life behind them, but further spurred changes in peer group composition and interactions with former gang acquaintances.

Once a gang member feels as if they want to leave their gang, the popular myth is that the member must undergo a formal and often violent exit ritual or ceremony. This may often include committing a crime (e.g., killing your own mother or a rival gang member), undergoing a violent jumping or beating out ritual, or being formally blessed out by the gang's leader. While tales of these violent and organized means of leaving the gang are often echoed across active gang members, former members seldom discuss engaging in any of these ceremonial processes of leaving. So how then do most gang members leave their gang? Most research has instead found

that gang members leave through more informal means (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Peterson, 2012; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This mostly includes a gradual or abrupt reduction in time spent with former gang associates as well as an increase in time spent with other non-gang individuals.

Former members often experience a variety of consequences following their change in gang status. While some gang leavers may find themselves – as well as their close friends and family members – the focus of threats or acts of violence from their former gang associates (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002), recent research by Pyrooz and Decker (2011) demonstrated that leavers are most likely to face threats or acts of violence from rival gangs as well as continued police scrutiny because their “leaver” status is not recognized or acknowledged by others. However, leaving the gang does not lead to only negative consequences. In their research with middle school gang youth, Melde and Esbensen (2011) demonstrated notable increases in prosocial attitudes and involvement with non-gang prosocial peers following gang desistance. What’s more, dramatic reductions in individual involvement in crime as well as experiences with violent victimization are commonly witnessed following gang leaving (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Peterson et al., 2004).

In their research with the Rochester Youth Development Study, Thornberry and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that gang affiliation – for any length of time – can, however, have long-lasting deleterious consequences (e.g. arrest in adulthood, early parenthood, and unstable employment) across the lives of members. While those who had the longest length or duration of gang membership experienced the greatest number of long-term consequences, those with shorter periods of membership experienced far fewer negative outcomes. This is a hopeful finding for practitioners and policy-makers, demonstrating that reducing the amount of time an individual spends in a gang can yield a meaningful reduction in negative long-term outcomes.

Given gang members increased exposure to violent victimization, one of the most promising points for intervention is immediately following a violent incident. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) assert that intervention services which are provided shortly after the violent incident and away from the influence of gang associates – often within a hospital emergency room, police station, or in a family setting – have the greatest likelihood of success. For example, Operation Ceasefire in Chicago, Illinois, has used this approach by dispatching volunteers to hospital emergency rooms to speak with victims of violence as well as refer them to a variety of services (e.g., support services as well as educational and job placement services) (see Ceasefire Chicago, 2009).

Anti-Gang Strategies

Anti-gang programs typically take one of three forms: prevention, intervention, and suppression. “Prevention” efforts are aimed at stopping gang membership before it occurs. In other words, youth are targeted before they join gangs. The second strategy is known as “intervention.” Intervention efforts are aimed at getting gang members out of gangs. The final strategy is known as “suppression.” Like intervention efforts, suppression efforts target youth after they join gangs.

Prevention

There are many efforts aimed at preventing youth from joining gangs, but few research studies examining the effectiveness of prevention efforts. One example of a gang prevention program that has been extensively studied and found to prevent gang membership is known as the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. This program is catalogued as a primary prevention program, meaning it targets all youth. The main part of the program

consists of a standardized, 13 lesson curriculum targeting sixth- or seventh-graders.⁶ The G.R.E.A.T. program is delivered in a classroom setting by uniformed law-enforcement officers who have received extensive training in the program.

Evaluation efforts have provided mixed support for the G.R.E.A.T. program. Results from an early cross-sectional study of approximately 6,000 eighth-graders attending public schools in eleven diverse American locales indicated that students who had received the G.R.E.A.T. program were less likely to be gang members, to be less involved in delinquent behavior, to hold fewer delinquent attitudes and associations, and to hold more prosocial attitudes than youth who had not received the G.R.E.A.T. program (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999). A more rigorous longitudinal panel study of approximately 3,600 youth attending public schools in six diverse locales, however, reported less favorable results. Youth who had the G.R.E.A.T. program reported more prosocial attitudes and less pro-delinquent attitudes than students who had not had the G.R.E.A.T. program, but the differences took approximately two years to emerge; equally important, there were no differences between the two groups in terms of gang membership or involvement in delinquent offending (Esbensen et al., 2001).

It should be noted that the G.R.E.A.T. program underwent considerable revision based primarily on the results of these two earlier evaluations. A more recent experimental panel study of the “revised” G.R.E.A.T. program found that the revisions paid off: youth who completed the G.R.E.A.T. program were less likely than youth without the G.R.E.A.T. program to report gang membership; no differences, however, were found in terms of involvement in violence (Esbensen et al., 2012). Still, G.R.E.A.T. remains an example of an anti-gang primary prevention program.

⁶ The program also has a less often used elementary school component, family training component, and summer component).

Intervention

Gang intervention efforts, broadly speaking, are those that deal with active gang members in ways that encourage them to desist or at least reduce their level of gang participation. Intervention efforts have had a long history of use in the U.S. and include individual, group, and community focused approaches. Intervention programs often rely on individual and group counseling, the use of outreach workers including former gang members, providing alternative opportunities for members, as well as neighborhood violence reduction efforts. One notable approach uses detached street workers employed to assist gang members in finding legitimate opportunities based upon their needs as well as reduce sources of gang cohesion. According to Klein (1971), programs such as the Midcity Project in Boston (1954-1957), the Chicago Youth Development Project (1960-1965), and the Group Guidance Project and Ladino Hills Program (1961-1965) provide perhaps the “purist” examples.

While intervention programs temporarily fell out of popular favor, Spergel (1995) demonstrated a resurgence of renewed national use beginning around the late 1980s. One recent intervention effort which was evaluated by Spergel and colleagues (2006) and deemed *effective* program is the Building Resources for the Intervention and Deterrence of Gang Engagement (BRIDGE) program in Riverside, California. The program relied on an intervention team (which included police officers, probation and parole officers, outreach workers, and social service providers) to develop and implement individual treatment plans for gang youth. Spergel and colleagues (2006) demonstrated that involvement in the BRIDGE program reduced likelihood of arrest for drug offenses as well as involvement in serious and nonserious violent offenses.

Another recent example is the Boys and Girls Club Gang Intervention through Targeted Outreach (GITTO) program. The program targets “wannabe” and active gang youth between the ages of 10 to 17 and recruits them for the GITTO intervention program. Through Boys and Girls Club membership, the program focuses on providing gang youth improvement across five core areas: individual character development, educational development, health and life skills, the arts, as well as sports, fitness, and recreation. Similar to the Boys and Girls Club Gang Prevention through Targeted Outreach program – which has been evaluated and identified as an *effective* prevention program (Arbreton & McClanahan, 2002; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2006) – the GITTO program has endorsed by the National Gang Center as a *promising* program based on the positive outcomes of youth involved in the program. These include reductions in involvement in gang-related behavior, reduced contact with the juvenile justice system, and improvements in positive school engagement (Howell, 2010).

Suppression

Suppression efforts aimed at youth gangs also have a long history. These techniques typically involve intensive “crackdowns” or “roundups” by law enforcement officers against gang members. Perhaps the most widely known efforts have been found in Los Angeles, with the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) unit. Such suppression efforts typically involve law enforcement officers saturating areas with a heavy gang presence to make large numbers of arrests for any and all offenses possible.

While suppression techniques present a visible effort by law enforcement that provide the public with a sense that police are “doing something” to eradicate the gang problem, this approach is fraught with problems. Klein (1995) has argued that such efforts are particularly

ineffective in dealing with gangs. For one thing, gang members are rounded up but only spend a short time in police custody before being released. This undermines the severity element of deterrence-based strategies. The fact that these efforts are carried out only occasionally also undermines the certainty element of deterrent based strategies. In short, there is little reason to believe that suppression based strategies are successful at eradicating gang problems.

CONCLUSION

The current essay has explored the literature regarding youth gangs. We began with a discussion of what constitutes a gang, gang member, and gang crime. Next we turned our attention to theoretical explanations of how gangs develop and what makes members join. The specific role of violence in both gang development and gang member joining was highlighted. We then turned to a discussion of what gang life is like, again with an emphasis on the role of violence. This transitioned into a discussion of theoretical perspectives of selection, facilitation, and enhancement of crime and violence since gang membership is a transitory state. While we were unable to cover all relevant topics related to youth gangs, we hope that this overview provides discussion (and perhaps even controversy) related to media and law enforcement perspectives of youth gangs and their activities.

We concluded with a discussion of two key factors: gang desistance and programs designed to facilitate desistance. Our conclusion that gangs often desist “naturally”—that is, without official intervention—may be somewhat surprising to the uninitiated. Yet, the growing body of literature on gang desistance suggests that youth often simply “age out” or “burn out” of the gang lifestyle. The role of violence in desistance, however, cannot be understated, though. Research has found that one of the most important times to intervene in the lives of gang youth

to try to get them out of gangs is shortly following a violent event affecting them, a friend, or a family member (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). We conclude with a brief discussion on effective (and ineffective) gang prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies.

In summary, violence and gangs often go “hand-in-hand.” This postulate presents some sense of optimism. First, as gang members are high rate violent offenders, efforts to reduce gang membership should result in a corresponding decrease in violent activity. Second, violence—or the threat of violence—presents a functional purpose for gang cohesiveness. While challenging, reducing the degree of violence (real or threatened) in the gang context has the potential of reducing gang cohesiveness. Finally, intervening shortly after a serious violent offense occurs can be an effective time to start helping youth out of gangs.

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