

Chris Melde
Frank Weerman *Editors*

Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media

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ISBN 978-3-030-47213-9 ISBN 978-3-030-47214-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47214-6>

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This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Introduction

Twenty years ago, a group of researchers founded the “Eurogang Program of Research,” a loosely knit network of researchers and policymakers concerned with gangs and troublesome youth groups across the globe¹. It evolved out of attempts from American researchers to determine and document the existence of gangs in Europe (Klein, 1996; see for a short overview of the history of this group, Maxson & Esbensen, 2016). It includes not only European but also American researchers as well as several researchers from other parts of the world. The Eurogang Program of Research is now an official working group of the European Society of Criminology, with a primary goal of fostering collaborative efforts to conduct multisite, multi-method, comparative research on street gangs. The network developed common gang definitions and instruments that can be utilized in local contexts around the world, and has held numerous workshops and meetings, on an almost yearly basis. This sustained effort has produced a number of collaborative publications, including edited books and peer-reviewed journal articles that are widely cited by authors conducting gang-focused research in numerous countries.

This chapter introduces the sixth edited volume of contributions from the Eurogang network. Research presented in this volume stems primarily from works presented at the 17th and 18th Eurogang workshops, held on the campus of Michigan State University in 2017 and across both Erasmus University in Rotterdam and a conference center in Almen, the Netherlands, in 2018. Together, these workshops focused on factors associated with modern street gangs, on gang desistance and interventions, and on how gangs and gang members are influenced by their local context. A common theme that emerged across these two workshops, however, was on the connection between the internet, social media, and street gangs. From previous research, it was clear that gangs and gang members are at least as active online as are other same-age groups and youths (see, e.g., Pyrooz, Decker, and Moule, 2015). However, the presentations and discussions emanating from the recent Eurogang meetings moved well beyond whether and if gangs are present on social

¹For more information on The Eurogang Project, go to <https://eurogangproject.com/>.

media to more substantive discussions on how best to use the Internet and social media as a medium for research and the potential consequences of online activities for interpersonal relationships and gang activities. There is much to be learned by gang researchers about the nature of online content, how best to collect and analyze such information, and how the creation and dissemination of online materials influences people and their “real world” activities.

Gangs and the Rise of Social Media

Diffusion of internet-based technologies of communication have significantly reshaped the social landscape in a matter of a decade. Roughly 45 percent of the world’s population report access to a smartphone (Newzoo, 2019). Time spent online among teens in the USA, for instance, doubled between 2006 and 2016 (Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg, 2019), with nearly 95% of US teens reporting access to a smartphone (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Ownership of smartphones among those ages 16 to 24 in the United Kingdom has gone from 29 percent in 2008 to 96 percent in 2019 (Ofcom, 2019), with similar rates of ownership across most western industrialized nations. Access to the Internet and social media is now available to most segments of society in advanced countries, suggesting the influence of the Internet and social media is no longer segmented along socio-economic lines or geographically in many regions.

As might be expected with any technological advance, street gangs and their members have made use of these advances, in part to advance their “brand” and propagate their activities. In what has been referred to as “internet banging” (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013), gang members commonly use social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) to express and promote their gang membership. While the medium for this content is relatively new, with content more easily shared across a larger, worldwide audience, the common themes emanating from these productions are largely akin to the messages gangs and their members promulgated through local graffiti, music, and gossip of days gone by. Gangs continue to signal to others, including their rivals, that they are tough, unafraid of violence, and are successful in lucrative illicit markets. Public reactions to these messages are predictably negative, and many fear that the easy accessibility, long reach, and permanence of the messages shared across social media platforms may enhance the already negative influences gangs can have on society by stoking greater interpersonal conflict and tensions between criminal organizations that may impact innocent civilians. Of course, the actual influence of “internet banging” on changes in actual violence is far from settled empirically. Given the potential for the Internet and social media to alter communication strategies and relationships within and between gangs, it brings forth serious questions pertaining to the study of street gangs and their activities.

The role of the Internet and social media as a public platform may have ramifications for the identification and study of street gangs with respect to The Eurogang

Project. After all, the Eurogang definition of a street gang, which states that “a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, *street-oriented* youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Weerman, Maxson, Esbensen, Aldridge, Medina, and van Gemert, 2009: 20), makes little room for purely online groups to fall under the street gang label. In particular, groups currently considered as street gangs under this definitional criterion must be “street-oriented,” in that they frequently congregate in public settings. How does the Internet and social media factor into public behavior? Do changes in the routine activity patterns of youth and young adults more generally, who now spend growing hours of the day on the Internet and social media have implications for how frequently street gangs hang out on the street, in parks, in cars, or other public settings, and ultimately have implications for what we consider street gangs? More directly, can the Internet and social media be considered “public behavior?” If so, how do we factor this into our methods of research to understand street gangs and their associated behaviors?

Members of the Eurogang network have spent considerable time debating this topic and its ramifications for research and the instruments that have been developed by this group (see the Eurogang Manual (Weerman, et al., 2009: 20) and associated data collection instruments (The Eurogang Project, n.d.). At the 2018 workshop in Almen, the Netherlands, working groups were convened to explore these issues and consider any necessary changes needed to these guiding documents. This process is ongoing after renewed discussions at the 19th Eurogang workshop held in the summer of 2019 at the University of Kent, in Canterbury, England. Chapters in this volume will describe some of the inherent controversies in using the Internet and social media to study gangs and some of the social processes that make this source of information intriguing from a social scientific standpoint. They will also offer some new approaches to gang definitions and classifications that may be useful to study new appearances of gangs and troublesome youth groups in the modern era.

Contents of this Volume

The current volume is comprised of two parts. The first part focuses specifically on gangs and the internet, and is comprised of both methodologically oriented chapters on the merits, controversies, and ethical considerations associated with Internet-based research, as well as empirical analyses examining the association between gangs, social media, and the internet. The second part is a collection of chapters on other important areas of modern gang research and intervention, especially as it relates to factors associated with disengagement from gangs and official responses to these groups.

The book opens with a chapter by one of the leading criminologists in the area of cybercrime, Dr. Thomas Holt, who provides an overview of the considerations researchers need to keep in mind when using online communications as a source of scientific study. Importantly, this chapter helps to situate those interested in using

online platforms for gang research into the standards of practice for online data collection methodologies more broadly, in what is a quickly developing and changing area of research. The second chapter, by Urbanik and colleagues, goes into detail on the practical and ethical dilemmas faced by gang researchers in this area. Through retrospective accounts of their own use of the Internet and social media in their research with gangs across multiple contexts, these researchers frankly describe in vivid detail how online platforms shaped their research and the problems and prospects they encountered while doing this sort of research. In particular, this chapter focuses on the meanings associated with “gang artefacts” found online and the problems inherent in interpretations made from online postings.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the volume provide a mix of theoretical and empirical examinations of gangs in the era of the Internet and social media, focusing on how information and communications technologies have altered the interpersonal dynamics of streets gangs. Fernandez-Planells and colleagues describe how globalization and social media have changed the gang landscape, and provide a detailed description of how these processes have led to the emergence of transnational gangs and new roles for gang members as agents of mediation in local contexts around the globe. They call for a renewed understanding of the role of gangs in the modern era, where crime and violence are but a part of the complex roles these groups can play in society. Carballo and Van Damme explore how representations of gangs in digital media is shaped by the local context, especially as it relates to the roles of men and women in gangs. Through systematic comparative coding of online news media posts on females in gangs across two Central American countries, Honduras and El Salvador, the authors demonstrate unique ways in which women are portrayed across these contexts. What the chapter makes clear, however, is that gender roles, with males viewed as gang leaders and females as their subordinates, remain a powerful influence on how gang activities are described in popular press coverage of gang violence.

McCuddy and Esbensen provide a quantitative comparative assessment of the similarities and differences in the online and offline communication patterns of gang and non-gang youth. Interestingly, they find gang youth report greater use of online communication technologies than non-gang respondents in their multi-site sample. However, the effects of exclusively online peers do not appear to produce unique effects on delinquent outcomes once controlling for offline peer delinquency, which suggests online activities may best be conceived as an extension of peer processes that take place on the street.

Reid and Valasik tackle the issue of far right, alt-right, groups that have been a focus of attention in much of the USA and European countries in the past 5 years. Largely based upon the demographic make-up of these groups and the political nature of their activities, white supremacist and other hate groups have largely been studied outside the context of street gangs. In this chapter, however, the authors make the case that the current manifestation of alt-right groups should be considered street gangs. Through analysis of content posted on a popular social media platform for these types of groups, the authors explore the possible connections

between online activities and real world behaviors, especially after notable violent events.

Lastly, Galasso and colleagues take a different approach to understanding the role of social media in producing real world violence, and the impact street gangs have on this dynamic, by examining these topics in a general sample of youth in a high crime city. Importantly, this work adds to the growing body of literature on the role of gangs and social media in the etiology of violence because it did not purposively sample on these factors. That is, those involved in the study were not recruited through social media platforms, nor did they have to be a gang member to participate. Rather, this general sample of school-aged youth were asked to describe the etiology of violence in their local schools and neighborhoods, and how social media and gangs influenced these incidents. This study suggests that social media exacerbates interpersonal disputes among youth, both serving as an instigator in physical fights and as a venue for post conflict communications between the subjects and their peers. That said, in their local context, it did not appear that gangs and their members were unique in their use of social media for such purposes, or a particularly salient part of the interpersonal disputes emanating from this local school context.

The second part of the book provides empirical and theoretical insights into a number of persistent gang issues, including gang disengagement and effective responses to gangs. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 focus on the factors associated with leaving gangs and the multitude of physical, emotional, and social consequences of the disengagement process. Both Forkby and colleagues as well as Morck and associates examine gang disengagement through qualitative examination of the lives of former gang members, many of whom were active in biker gangs. These authors describe the trials and tribulations of ex-gang members with respect to their development of new identities, and how past associations with gangs continued to influence their lives well after they first walked away from the gang lifestyle. Decker and Pyrooz examine the role of spirituality and religion in the disengagement process, owing to the commonly held belief that prisoners are inspired by religious and spiritual factors to change their deviant ways. Interestingly, they find the relationship between religion, spirituality, and disengagement to be complex, suggesting religion may not inspire disengagement, but rather those who are more removed from the gang lifestyle report growing more spiritual.

The remaining four chapters provide further insights into modern responses to gangs and gang members, from official sanctions to community and programmatic interventions. Scott explores the influence of formal and informal activities on the likelihood of involvement in violent incidents among youth housed in a juvenile justice facility. In particular, he examines whether the common finding of a positive association between time spent in unstructured activities and involvement in violent crime holds true in a confined facility. Results suggest that while gang members are involved in a higher number of violent incidents in juvenile justice facilities, the role of structured and unstructured activities is not as straight forward as is the case on the street. De Jong and Denkers explore the all-important question of how interventionists can best connect with high-risk adolescent gang members and work to

reduce their often violent misbehavior. They draw upon two sources of data to examine whether “tough love” strategies may well help to improve interpersonal relationships between street workers and troubled youth. Rubenson and Huey provide an overview of the disconcerting reality that interventions that aim to help gangs and gang members reduce their involvement in crime and violence may do more harm than good. They review the literature on iatrogenic effects before critically examining what these unintended consequences mean in practice, and how we might better examine the efficacy of gang interventions and monitor both their potential successes and failures. Lastly, Dyberg and Egan provide an in-depth overview and push for further development of programs and practices in the area of moral psychology in gang focused prevention and intervention strategies. In particular, these authors make a case for why moral disengagement is a useful theoretical model associated with gang member offending, and how “discriminant moral disengagement” might be conceptualized in gang prevention and intervention.

In conclusion, the Eurogang Program of Research has contributed greatly to the advancement of gang research across the globe. Hundreds of researchers have attended the 19 workshops hosted across numerous countries in Europe and North America. What started off as a small group of researchers interested in the comparative study of gangs and troublesome youth groups has evolved into a lasting program that has attracted the attention of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners dealing with youth crime and violence. That said, the original goals of this collective have yet to be achieved. We have yet to sustain prospective, multi-method, comparative gang research on a global scale. This volume, however, takes us a step in the right direction by focusing on the role of the Internet and social media as a medium of study for gang research. The Internet opens new channels for comparative research that can help break down many of the barriers international scholars have faced in collecting comparative data. Modern technology will continue to evolve to create better opportunities for collecting valid and reliable data on gangs and the local context, and to the extent that we make use of these advancements will have the direct benefit of pushing the Eurogang research agenda forward, in hopes of achieving our ultimate goals of prospective, multi-method, comparative gang research.

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Scott H. Decker is Foundation Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. In 2009, he received the University Award for Cutting Edge Research in 2009, and was named a Foundation Professor in 2010. Prior to working at ASU, he was Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at UM-St. Louis where he received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research in 1989 and was named Curators' Professor in 2001. Professor Decker was named a fellow of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in 2007, was named a fellow of the

American Society of Criminology in 2012, and was the Hindelang Lecturer at the University at Albany in 2009. In March 2011, he won the Bruce Smith Award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. Professor Decker is the author of 17 books, more than 150 articles and chapters, and more than 100 presentations in the USA, Canada, Europe and Central America. His research has been funded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the National Science Foundation, US Department of Justice, US Department of Health and Human Services, and National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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Thomas J. Holt is a professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University (USA) whose research focuses on computer hacking, malware, and the role of the Internet in facilitating all manners of crime and deviance. His work has been published in various journals including *Crime and Delinquency*, *Deviant Behavior*, *the Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Youth and Society*.

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Chris Melde is Associate Director, Director of Graduate Studies, and an Associate Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. He is an affiliated faculty member in Global Urban Studies and the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University, and a research associate at the Michigan Justice Statistics Center. His primary research interests include street gangs, youth violence, adolescent development, individual and community reactions to crime and victimization risk, and program evaluation. He is currently the principal investigator or co-principal investigator on several funded projects, including two National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded projects on school safety in the Flint, MI, area. These projects focus on the role of school safety in the successful transition to high school, the identification of mental health issues among students in elementary schools, and best practices for developing a positive and safe school climate. Dr. Melde was awarded the 2015 Tory J. Caeti Memorial Award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Juvenile Justice section, given in recognition of the contribution of emerging scholars to the field of juvenile justice, for his work on gangs and youth violence prevention.

María Oliver is predoctoral researcher at the University Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona), who collaborates in TRANSGANG project as Fieldwork Support Researcher in Madrid (Spain). A former member of the ALKQN, she combines her personal experience with her academic studies both in education and gender fields. Among her fields of study are intercultural education; gender violence in youth street groups and memory in youth street groups.

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Miriam Rubenson is a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Southern California. Her research interests include disruptive behavior disorders, interventions for criminal justice populations, and gender and racial bias.

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Chapter 1

Assessing Traditional and Nontraditional Data Collection Methods to Study Online Phenomena



Thomas J. Holt

Over the last 30 years, the world has been radically reshaped by the availability of the Internet, mobile computing, and social media. Computer-mediated communications (CMC) services from email to bulletin boards and newsgroups made it possible for people to talk about anything, regardless of their location in physical space in the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of social media platforms in the 2000s, like Facebook and Twitter, allowed people to share what is happening in their immediate area with the entire world, from mundane acts like eating to historic political events. More recent innovations like livestreaming video capabilities enabled through Facebook, Instagram, and other services, also make it possible to share events as they occur from a first-person perspective.

The near ubiquity of the Internet and social media presents a remarkable opportunity for researchers, as the information posted by individuals provides deep first-hand insights into various social phenomena (e.g., DiMarco & DiMarco, 2003; Hine, 2005; Holt, 2010; Kivits, 2005; Quinn & Forsyth, 2013). The perceived anonymity associated with the use of technology makes people willing to discuss activities and interests in online spaces that they are less likely to share in face-to-face settings (Kivits, 2005). In addition, the global nature of the Internet makes it possible for individuals to find others who share their interests, regardless of how esoteric or unusual the topic may be (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Quinn & Forsyth, 2013).

As a consequence, criminologists and sociologists have used online communications to study deviant sexual behaviors, pornography use, as well as a range of crimes occurring in on- and off-line settings (see Holt & Bossler, 2016 for review). At the same time, the relatively recent nature of online data collection has made it difficult for researchers to find a common set of practices to guide the research process using Internet-based data. There is also a lack of agreement as to the best ways to respond to the unique ethical dilemmas and concerns that may arise in the course

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of a study. Thus, this chapter will provide an overview of the current state of research using online data, including a review of the sources that may be used by researchers, and potential best practices for conducting research in the field.

1.1 Understanding the Structure of the Internet

Any researcher interested in using online data sources must first understand the general structure of the Internet. While most just assume the Internet is a singular resource, there are several different services that operate within it. An excellent example of this dynamic lies with the World Wide Web, which is perhaps the most common service used by individuals when accessing the Internet. The Web is a service that operates on the Internet, utilizing a unique programming language called HyperText Markup Language, or HTML, to present content to the user through a specific piece of software interface called the Web browser. Many may not realize that the Web is a portion of the Internet, instead simply using the term Internet to refer to any resource that is accessible.

The relationship between the Internet and the services residing within it has direct implications for researchers interested in using information made available online. The different services and layers present on the Internet provide researchers with different data points based on where that may be located. In particular, there are different layers of operation on the World Wide Web that can be observed which directly impact the information available for data collection. The first layer is often referred to as the Open Web, as it includes the portion of the World Wide Web that can be accessed through traditional web browsers, like Firefox or Internet Explorer. Additionally, the content of sites operating on the Open Web may be captured by search engines like Google and indexed in results (Dupont et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2016; Leukfeldt et al., 2017; Smirnova & Holt, 2017; Yip et al., 2013). There is a second layer of the Open Web that is referred to as the Deep Web, as the content is accessible but blocked in some way. Deep Web content may be partially indexed by search engines, but users may be unable to access it directly because it is password protected or requires a user to register with a service provider to observe the content. For instance, a person's Facebook profile may be indexed via search engine results, but cannot be accessed without an active account. In some cases, the information may be behind a paywall, as with scientific journals and print media services. Lastly, sites that disable their ability to be indexed by search engines become hidden and reside on the Deep Web by default.

A third layer of services operates on the on the so-called Dark Web, which is a portion of the Internet that utilizes encryption to conceal information (Barratt, 2012; Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, 2017; Smirnova & Holt, 2017). The Dark Web depends on a service called The Onion Router, or TOR, which utilizes a unique set of encryption protocols that routes an individual's Web traffic through other TOR users' computers in the network (Barratt, 2012; Martin, 2014). As a consequence, it is difficult to identify the location and identity of anyone using the

service. In addition, it is difficult to identify the physical location of any website or service hosted on TOR, making them difficult to take off-line (Barratt, 2012; Smirnova & Holt, 2017). Individuals can gain access to TOR by simply downloading and installing its free service package. Once active, TOR provides the user with a built-in Web browser that connects them to sites hosted on the Dark Web. These sites are not indexed by traditional search engines like Google, though there are some simple search tools that provide limited access to active sites (Barratt, 2012). Thus, TOR is quickly becoming a powerful tool for cybercriminals to use to minimize their risk of detection.

The nature of the Open, Deep, and Dark Web presents unique opportunities for researchers, as it appears there are distinctions in the ways these services are used. For instance, the majority of research over the last 30 years utilized Open and Deep Web content culled from social media sites, forums, and websites to understand a range of offenses (see Holt & Bossler, 2016). This is largely a function of the ease with which this content can be created and accessed by the offender community. There is no technical knowledge needed to access Open and Deep Web content, and virtually all interests groups are represented in these spaces. In addition, some Open and Deep Web groups have a deep history within certain criminal communities (Holt et al., 2013; Mann & Sutton, 1998). For instance, studies of prostitution and hacking communities operating on the Open and Deep Web utilized samples that include years of posts due to their operational longevity (Chu, Holt, & Ahn, 2010; Holt et al., 2013).

There has been an increase in research utilizing Dark Web sites and content over the last decade, though they have a distinct focus. The majority of research examines the practices of drug sellers who operate e-commerce sites on these platforms (Barratt, 2012; Dupont et al., 2017). There is also a small but growing body of research considering the practices of actors engaged in the sale of stolen financial information (Smirnova & Holt, 2017) and firearms on the Dark Web (Copeland et al., 2019). Some assessments of the scope of the Dark Web also suggest there is a proportion of sites and services trafficking in child pornography and illicit sexual content (Ablon et al., 2016). This is not to suggest that Dark Web services are only used by serious criminal actors. It is simply not clear how these services are being used by the broader public as a specialized platform for secured communications. Thus, further study is needed to assess the tenor of discussions on Dark Web sites and compare the extent to which Open and Dark Web services differ on the basis of both legal and criminal use.

1.2 Assessing Forums, Bulletin Boards, and Newsgroups

Though there are differences in the Open, Deep, or Dark Web, there are several forms of CMC that appear across these parts of the World Wide Web that can be mined for criminological inquiry. Some of the most commonly used forms of CMC in criminological research are web forums (see Blevins & Holt, 2009; Holt, 2007,

2009; Holt & Blevins, 2007; Holt, Blevins, & Kuhns, 2008, 2014; Holt & Lampke, 2010; Hutchings & Holt, 2015; Motoyama, McCoy, Levchenko, Savage, & Voelker, 2011; Mann & Sutton, 1998; Malesky & Ennis, 2004; Taylor, 1999; Williams & Copes, 2005; Yip et al., 2013), bulletin board systems (BBS; Jenkins, 2001; Landreth, 1985; Meyer, 1989), and newsgroups (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Gauthier & Forsythe, 2004; Loper, 2000; Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). Though they differ slightly in structure and use, they are all asynchronous communications platforms, in that individuals can post a message, and others can respond to it for as long as the content is visible. For instance, a post made in 2003 could still generate responses today, as long as the forum is still active. As a result, this form of CMC is inherently valuable from a research standpoint, as long-standing discussions can be observed and tracked to identify historical patterns in the posting behaviors of participants and exchanges across the forum as a whole.

In general, forums, BBS, and newsgroups are structured by topic or theme, ranging from cars to technology to sport to any activity one can imagine. The forum is then separated into multiple subsections centered on a given issue of interest to a particular audience. For instance, research on far-right extremist groups suggests that their forums are separated into unique topics related to ideological beliefs, news, and even ladies-only content (e.g., Castle, 2012; Holt et al., 2019). Each subforum is then populated with distinct threads, whereby an initial post made by a user generates responses from others that become threaded together. These threads may be based on a question, an opinion, or requests to gain information about people's personal experiences. Depending on the nature of the forum and the interest in a given post, threads may last for days, weeks, or even months (e.g., Holt, 2010; Holt, 2013a, 2013b).

The general nature of this form of CMC are of substantive value for researchers as the natural conversations observed over time allow forums to be treated as "a kind of marathon focused discussion group" (Mann & Sutton, 1998: 210). The exchanges between participants not only enable researchers to engage in analyses of social networks based on social interactions (Decary-Hetu & Dupont, 2012; Holt, Smirnova, & Chua, 2016), but also consider subcultural values among deviant groups (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Holt, 2007; Jenkins, 2001; Roberts & Hunt, 2012). Increasingly, there is also evidence that forums are being used on both the Open and Dark Web as a means to sell personal information (Smirnova & Holt, 2017) and illicit physical goods and services like drugs (Barratt, 2012; Dolliver, 2015) and firearms (Copeland et al., 2019). In these forums, each thread acts as a unique advertising space for an individual vendor. Prospective buyers can then ask questions of the seller and communicate their experiences with the service provider (Dupont Dupont et al., 2017; Holt, 2013a, 2013b). The exchanges within the forums can be used to understand the scope of these illicit economies (Holt et al., 2016), the practices of buyers and sellers (Copeland et al., 2019; Dupont et al., 2017), and their organizational structure (Holt, 2013a, 2013b; Hutchings & Holt, 2015; Milrod & Monto, 2012).

Many of these studies are qualitative, utilizing the text-based communications to conduct content analyses and methodical examinations of the content. An

increasing number of quantitative studies have also been produced, converting the qualitative posts into numeric values for statistical tests of various hypotheses related to on- and off-line offenses. For example, Cunningham and Kendall (2009) used content generated from multiple sites used to review the services of prostitutes in the United States to assess changes in sex work based on user comments related to the prices, activities, and demographic composition of sex workers generally. Similarly, Holt, Smirnova, and Chua (2016) conducted an analysis to estimate the profits made by vendors selling stolen personal information in 13 web forums operating across the globe.

Researchers who seek to use data from forums and BBS face an interesting decision: whether to use data from open or closed communities. Specifically, an open forum enables individuals to gain access to the content of any thread and post without the need for registering a username and password with the site (e.g., Holt, 2010). These sites are often on the Open Web, as they are indexed by search engines and have minimal restrictions on user access. Closed forums and BBS may be on the Open, Deep, or Dark Web, though they will require users to create an account with the site to view its content (Barratt, 2012; Holt, 2013a, 2013b; Smirnova & Holt, 2017).

The location and type of forum has direct implications for the ethical protections that a researcher must consider before engaging in data collection. Individuals who utilize open forum data may be able to treat the content as a naturally occurring conversation, similar to what is observed in real-world discussions in public spaces, like streets and cafes (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Silverman, 2013). The dialogues occurring in these spaces occur without the need for researcher intervention, and require no real interaction with participants in order to capture users' behavior (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Mann & Sutton, 1998). Additionally, it is generally difficult to identify the actual identity of participants in these forums, rendering them mostly anonymous.

To that end, criminological researchers have utilized open forum data to study a range of offenses, such as digital piracy (Holt & Copes, 2010), computer hacking (Holt, 2007; 2009; Mann & Sutton, 1998; Taylor, 1999), identity theft (Franklin, Paxson, Perrig, & Savage, 2007; Holt & Lampke, 2010; Motoyama et al., 2011; Yip et al., 2013), malicious software creation (Chu et al., 2010; Holt, 2013a, 2013b), pedophilia (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010), self-harm via cutting (Adler & Adler, 2007), and prostitution (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Holt & Blevins, 2007; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Pruitt, 2007 & Krull, 2011).

Though open forums are relatively common, they may not reflect the most serious and sophisticated forms of offending. Participants within these communities may be less likely to share details on the more serious or overtly illegal aspects of their activities because of the potential for detection by law enforcement and outsiders. As an alternative, researchers can attempt to gain access to closed forums operating on the Deep or Dark Web. To do so, researchers must first identify these forums or communities, then attempt to create accounts and profiles within the sites (Jenkins, 2001; Landreth, 1985). The controls used may vary from simply creating

a username and password that can be used to login to the site, to more extreme steps such as providing payment to join the group, or giving references who can vouch for one's identity (e.g., Dupont et al., 2017; Hutchings & Holt, 2015). In addition, closed forums may restrict user access to certain parts of the forum or BBS to control what can be observed.

Researchers who would seek to develop closed source data must carefully think through the methodological and ethical implications of their study. Closed forums will require the use of deception in order to gain access to the community, and may demand the researcher interact with others in order to view posted content. Researchers must decide whether they are willing and able to conceal their real identity to the broader population of the forum (see Hine, 2005; Rutter & Smith, 2005). The illicit nature of most criminological research makes it preferable to engage in covert observations so as to minimize the likelihood of researcher contamination that may lead the community to change its practices (Holt & Bossler 2016; Loper, 2000; Mann & Sutton, 1998; Silverman, 2013). In fact, some communities may actively terminate the researchers' account and block their IP (Internet Protocol) addresses to minimize their ability to conduct future research (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Holt 2015). To that end, most criminological research has used surreptitious research methods, including avoiding posting or acknowledging their real identity or purpose for joining the community (see Holt & Bossler 2016; Holt 2015; Taylor, 1999 for exceptions).

Some researchers have argued that the use of covert online research methods is unfair to the participants because they are not given the ability to consent to participate in the study (see Bell, 2001; Kendall, 2004; Miller & Slater, 2000; Sveningsson, 2004). Regardless of the nature of the discussions, CMC participants should be made aware of the researchers' intentions so as to ensure they may truly understand the practices of the community (Bell, 2001; Kendall, 2004; Miller & Slater, 2000; Sveningsson, 2004). In addition, if the participants are aware of the researcher's purpose for joining the forum or BBS, then they may be free to ask participants direct questions about their behaviors and probe specific issues that may be of interest to the research community (Miller & Slater, 2000; Taylor, 1999). The use of such ethnographic techniques is relatively rare in criminological scholarship at this time (see Williams, 2006). For instance, Williams (2006) utilized an open data collection and observation process to examine the ways that participants in an online multi-player game interacted and regulated behavior through informal social controls. Since this study focused on gaming community behaviors rather than overt criminality, it may have been more appropriate to utilize an overt data collection process. Regardless, this study demonstrates how researchers may utilize overt data collection methods generally.

It must be noted that there is virtually no published criminological or sociological research utilizing forum data to assess the online behaviors of gang members. The lack of research may stem from the dearth of forums involving gang-related issues and individuals claiming membership with known or major gangs, such as Crips, Bloods, and Latin Kings. Open Web searches of keywords using known gang names and forum by this author consistently led to only two forums that focused

exclusively on street gangs with posts by active or former gang members. While there may be closed forums operating for gang members, they did not emerge during this author's attempts to identify online communities.

The absence of such content should not be interpreted as evidence that gang-focused forums do not exist; they may simply have limited appeal and utility to individuals who would traditionally join gangs. Urban youth from low socioeconomic status communities had limited technological access throughout the primary period of gang growth in the 1990s (e.g., Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013; Selay-Shayovitz, 2012). If forums did not emerge and persist during this period, their value may appear limited for the current generation of gang members, whose online engagement may occur through social media platforms (Hetu & Morselli, 2012). Further study is needed to assess these issues using both online data and qualitative interviews and surveys of human subjects (see also Moule et al., 2013; Selay-Shayovitz, 2012).

1.3 Websites, Blogs, and Texts

In addition to the social exchanges observed in forums and BBS, criminologists have begun to use content posted on websites as a means to understand aspects of offending. Website content can include everything from simple text-based content from dating websites to more dynamic social media content including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The content of websites is inherently valuable because it enables individuals to express their thoughts and ideas in their own words, as well as connect themselves to broader networks of websites and images (Hine, 2005). For example, Lee-Gonyea, Castle, and Gonyea (2009) utilized a sample of advertisements posted by male escorts in order to understand the common characteristics present in their content and the practice of soliciting sex online. Similar studies have used personal ads and content from dating sites to understand deviant behaviors such as "bugchasing," where individuals actively seek out sexual encounters with HIV-positive partners so as to potentially be exposed to the disease (Groves, 2004; Tewksbury, 2003).

A small number of studies have also used data from blogs and social networking sites to understand self-disclosure of criminality and behavior, as well as the potential ties between online communication and off-line offending. The benefit of weblogs, or blogs, is that they act as an online diary to document experiences over time in various environments through text, images, and video content (Hookway, 2008). The majority of this content is now found on social networking sites, particularly Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and more esoteric sites like LiveJournal (Holt et al., 2010; Hookway, 2008).

Researchers studying gang activity have utilized social network profiles as a means to assess their network structure and use of these platforms relative to their expressed social connectivity use (see Décary-Héту & Morselli, 2011; Morselli & Décary Héту, 2010; Womer & Bunker 2010). Using known gang names,

Décary-Héту and Morselli (2011) searched for active Facebook and Twitter profiles to assess their prevalence across Canada. The authors found an increase in the number of people who liked or friended gang pages and profiles, the majority of which were associated with major traditional street gangs such as the Bloods, Latin Kings, Crips, and MS-13. Additionally, the content of the sites appeared to focus on the gangs' activities within a specific territory and featured images and symbols unique to the specific gang, such as colors or images of graffiti (Morselli & Décary-Héту, 2010). A similar analysis performed by Wormer and Bunker (2010) found that social media pages were used more often as a means for young people to brag about their activities and threaten others with violence.

The benefits of social media and blog analyses also create distinct ethical challenges presented by the potential use of data from social media sites, as many participants in these sites use their actual identities in order to participate. As a result, researchers must take great care if they are to collect and store the personally identifiable information posted to ensure their confidentiality and minimize attribution in any research publication. Researchers must also determine whether they will use covert or overt engagement with potential research participants due to the nature of social media engagement. Researchers may only be able to observe the content of individuals' social media accounts by making a friend request and becoming connected. In most cases it may benefit the researcher to utilize passive and covert data collection methods, though they must determine how to present their identity in online spaces. Creating separate profiles, particularly populated with false information, presents potential complications from an ethical standpoint. Thus, researchers should consider how to conduct such research in conjunction with their ethical review boards.

An example of research using social media data in a way that may reflect less careful ethical development was conducted by Denney and Tewksbury (2013). The researchers developed a sample of participants from a social networking site designed to connect members of the Bondage Discipline Sadism and Masochism, or BDSM community together online. This site operates on the Deep Web, as user profiles cannot be accessed without creating a user account on the site (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). They utilized this feature as a way to test the factors associated with an increase in contacts on the site. The researchers created four user profiles, all male, and located in the same geographic area, with different physical descriptions and photos ranging from a male face to fully erect male genitals. The authors then collected information from every profile that contacted the four profiles and analyzed them for content. The authors found that most individuals who made contact with profiles reached out to those which featured nude photos. Additionally, these accounts had usernames with sexual connotations and specifically identified their fetishes or kinks (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013).

This descriptive study provided a novel data collection and analysis strategy. The authors also claimed to have conducted the study surreptitiously to minimize attribution. In the publication, however, the authors provided the full usernames and demographic details of accounts which contacted their profiles (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). They also provided direct quotes from users which may increase

the potential for the identification of user accounts. There was no information provided as to whether the authors falsified usernames or did anything to minimize user attribution. As a consequence, this study may have indirectly diminished the privacy and confidentiality of the participants (see Silverman, 2013).

These issues highlight the need for researchers to carefully consider not only the ethical implications of their research design, but also the extent to which they reveal their data sources and utilize quotes from participants in the course of attempting to publish their research (Holt, 2010; Silverman, 2013). Revealing the names of the websites and forums that are used in data collection may inadvertently enable others to reconstruct the sources of a study and potentially identify participants. This is true not only for academics, but for the broader public as well. Such a risk dictates that researchers take some effort to minimize the potential for sample attribution, lest they potentially reveal the identities of unaware research participants and cause online communities to change their behaviors for fear of appearing in a research study or being monitored by outsiders without consent.

1.4 Email, Instant Messaging, and Video Chat Services

While the data sources available on the Web present unique and novel opportunities to understand crime and deviance, the ability to communicate with others in real time has inherent value for traditional qualitative research methods (see Heerwegh, 2005; Holt, 2007; Holt & Copes, 2010; Jordan & Taylor, 1998; Pruitt, 2008; Taylor, 1999). While most interviews are conducted in person, the development of instant messaging protocols and streaming video services like Skype provides researchers with the ability to create similar engagement with research participants across the globe (Garcia, Standlee, Bechhoff, & Cui, 2009; Holt & Copes, 2010; Kivits, 2005; Mann & Stewart, 2002). Some have also encouraged the use of email and discussion forums as a means to conduct text-based asynchronous interviews with participants at their convenience (Heerwegh, 2005; Holt, 2010; Holt, 2018).

The direct benefits derived from the use of CMC as a means to conduct interviews are manifold. First, qualitative researchers can gain access to diffuse populations of offenders across the globe at little to no cost (Silverman, 2013). Second, millennials and busy individuals may feel more at ease communicating through these platforms with a researcher at a time that is convenient to them (Copes & Williams, 2005; Heerwegh, 2005; Holt & Copes, 2010; Williams & Copes, 2005). Third, email and instant messaging protocols enable researchers to easily adapt their interview protocols to online instruments and minimize time spent transcribing responses (see Kivits, 2005). Fourth, the use of text-based protocols may increase the likelihood of thoughtful responses from respondents as they can work through their ideas and provide them in their own words (Dillman, 2000; Heerwegh, 2005; Kivits, 2005; Riva, 2002). Fifth, the use of email and video chats allow researchers to easily maintain an archive of their encounter for future study, whether through audio, video, or screen captures of conversations (Mann & Stewart, 2002).

The advantages of CMC for interviews and more in-depth discussions are offset by potential pitfalls due to the inherent nature of technology and online conversation habits generally. For instance, if an individual is utilizing a slow Internet connection or has intermittent service, it may not be possible to have clear voice and images during a video chat (Hine, 2005). Such an issue would inherently limit the utility of the discussion and complicate the process of building rapport with the participant. Similarly, if a hardware or software failure occurs during an encounter via instant messaging or video chat, the event would be disrupted and possibly lost depending on the nature of the service (Hine, 2005).

In addition, the generally short-term nature of various forms of CMC may limit a researcher's ability to conduct a sustained interview via instant messaging or video streaming. Participant fatigue or potential for distraction from their open computer system may limit their potential to focus for long periods. As a result, it is incumbent on the research to develop protocols and probes that generate adequate responses within short bursts. Alternatively, arranging for multiple sessions of communication can ensure an improved likelihood of useful responses over sustained contacts.

For those using emails as a means of self-guided questionnaires, the researcher must find ways to ensure adequate responses from participants. Some may simply provide one- or two-word responses to complex questions as they may perceive that an issue is not applicable to them. Researchers must also take the time to ensure the respondent understands the nature of each question and is given prompts to provide full sentences and think through each response. There is also value in minimizing the total number of questions asked so as to increase the likelihood of successful completion of any protocol. Lastly, researchers should attempt to minimize the number of follow-up questions and requests after an interview has been submitted (Garcia et al., 2009; Kivits, 2005; Silverman, 2013). Such a strategy will help reduce any fatigue on the part of the participant and increase the likelihood of useable responses for the researcher.

1.5 Methodological Concerns and Practices in Internet-Based Research

As noted through the discussion above, there are clear challenges posed by Internet-based research. Beyond simply determining the platform one wishes to study, researchers must consider several factors that may influence the nature of their sample and findings. First, it is essential that researchers determine how much the phenomenon of interest they wish to study actually occurs in online spaces. While Internet access is common, there are clear variations in terms of patterns of use across platforms based on demographic backgrounds and physical geography (Zickuhr, Rainie, Purcell, & Duggan, 2013; Zickuhr, 2010). These conditions may influence the extent to which key groups may utilize the Internet to communicate

with others or engage in deviant and criminal behaviors, no matter how obliquely. For example, most forms of cybercrime, where the offense occurs as a direct result of technology, can be identified in some online space (see Holt & Bossler, 2016 for review).

Some forms of street crime may also involve an online component, such as the use of forums to discuss the practice of offending (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Cunningham & Kendall, 2009; Milrod & Monto, 2012). Little research has been able to quantify the extent to which online discussions are a reflection of all offenders' beliefs and positions or simply a representation of those individuals willing to take the risk to communicate their interests to others online. As such, researchers must recognize the limits to which their data may reflect the actual practices of offenders and groups operating in off-line spaces.

Additionally, it is imperative researchers carefully consider the ways in which they will identify data for the purposes of research. As mentioned above, online communities may exist on the Open, Deep, and Dark Web. As a consequence, the tools available to identify where these communities exist may be restricted based on possible search results. Individuals should utilize multiple search engines when possible so as to increase the likelihood that they identify as many potential sites in which to build a sample (Holt, 2010). This is due to the use of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) which may indirectly affect the results of search requests (Chen, 2012). Specifically, a website is categorized and will appear in search results on the basis of matches between keywords and phrases in its content. Website operators can artificially increase the likelihood their site appears in search results by including certain terms more often in the text of their site.

In order to reduce artificial search results, researchers should triangulate their searches between multiple engines. This can be relatively simple in practice, as evident in a study by Lee-Gonyea and associates (Lee-Gonyea et al., 2009), who developed a sample of websites used by male escorts to understand the language used in their advertisements and solicitation practices. The authors utilized multiple search strings in Google, and then compared the resulting sites against the results of four other search engines to validate their results (Lee-Gonyea et al., 2009). This strategy helps to increase the overall rigor of search results and build a more robust sample of websites with no real additional costs to the researcher.

Should a researcher need to build a sample of sites operating in the Deep Web, they may employ a similar strategy with initial searches of the Open or Surface Web (see also Holt et al., 2016). The contents of websites produced from the initial search engine queries can then be used to identify additional websites that will increase the total number of sites in the researchers' sample. This sort of modified snowball sampling strategy allows the researcher to connect disparate site results based on internal links and expand their sample beyond the immediate hits noted by a search engine (Chen, 2012; Damphouse, 2009; Holt, 2007). Such an approach can help to build a more robust sample of sites and understand the scope of offender communities in the absence of adequate statistics or empirical evidence regarding the presence of groups in online spaces (see Chen, 2012; Silverman, 2013).

After developing an appropriate search and collection protocol, researchers considering online data collection must take care to build a sample that is representative of the population of study. As with traditional qualitative and quantitative data collection, researchers should strive to develop a robust sample, which could be defined in part through the use of sites that are repeated in search results or across multiple discussion boards (e.g., Lee-Gonyea et al., 2009). In the case of studies utilizing CMC platforms, scholars may also be able to sample threads taken from multiple separate forums (e.g., Holt et al., 2016) or longer historical samples of posts based on discussions around certain cities (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Cunningham & Kendall, 2009; Décarry-Héту & Morselli, 2011), ideologies (Castle, 2012; Holt et al., 2018), or focused interests (Quinn & Forsyth, 2013; Roberts & Hunt, 2012).

Researchers should also take steps to validate the content of posts collected from CMCs, particularly through the judgments made by other forum users regarding some users' behavior (Cherny, 1999; Herley & Florencio, 2010; Mann & Stewart, 2002). If individual posters are called out because their behavior diverges from the larger population of the forum, that provides a clear indication of the boundaries of the community and the potential for false posting generally (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2001). The responses from forum moderators, or place managers, can also demonstrate what is acceptable and the extent to which the community regulates its members' behaviors through the deletion of posted content or outright banning certain members (see Holt, 2007, 2013b; Holt et al., 2008).

In addition, researchers must recognize that CMC content is not static regardless of the perceived stability or structure of the website or forum. Deviant communities and actors may change or remove content at any time, making it imperative that a scholar capture the content of a site as it appeared at the time they identified it so as to ensure a stable data point for later analysis (see Damphouse, 2009; Garcia et al., 2009; Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004; Hine, 2005; Lee-Gonyea et al., 2009). As such, researchers should not only utilize traditional data capturing techniques, such as detailed field notes and video and audio recordings (see Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Silverman, 2013), but also by taking screenshots of Web page content, or saving the Web page's contents to a hard drive or external storage media in its native HTML format for later review. In addition, some researchers copy and paste Web content into word-processing software or text files so that they can be uploaded and analyzed by hand or through qualitative software programs (Chu et al., 2010; Holt, 2007; Holt & Blevins, 2007). Though such efforts add a layer of effort to the project, it ensures the researcher long-term access to their data set and increases the potential for replication of findings through secondary analyses later (Holt & Bossler, 2016).

The fact that the Internet allows researchers relatively easy access to populations of foreign actors also creates opportunities to understand crime and deviance in transnational contexts (e.g., Holt et al., 2016). Should a researcher decide to utilize information posted in foreign languages, they must take care to use appropriate tools to facilitate translations in the event they are not native speakers themselves. For example, Google Translate and other free Web-based services can produce a relatively simplistic translation of certain languages and character sets. Machine

translations do not guarantee a clear or correct interpretation of slang, jargon, neologisms, or misspellings that may affect the final product. As a result, it is in the researchers' best interest to utilize native speakers or certified translators whenever possible to ensure the most accurate interpretation of content possible for later analyses.

An additional ethical concern that has yet to be addressed in a meaningful way by researchers using online data sources relates to the potential capture of juvenile participants. In the broader gang research literature, juveniles often serve as sample populations for interviews or survey data collection. These studies require careful ethical review and sufficient protections for anyone who may be unable to provide their own consent to participate. Such concerns have largely been sidestepped by online researchers as it is often difficult to determine the actual age of anyone engaging in a forum or other text-based communications medium (e.g., Adler & Adler, 2007; Hetu & Morselli, 2012). The information provided in a user profile could be easily falsified, and a researcher utilizing covert means may be unable to engage with participants to determine their age.

The rise of social media and image-based communications platforms may, however, increase the potential for researchers to identify accounts operated by juveniles. Sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat require users to be at least 13 years of age in order to create legitimate accounts. A person need only falsely enter their age in order to create an account, which may not be detected by the site operators. As a result, it is possible that individuals under the basic minimum age for use will have accounts and engage with others.

These conditions create an ethical dilemma for researchers. On one side, if a user has a publicly accessible account, then that information can be viewed as naturally occurring, unprotected speech even if they are underage. On the other, juveniles are unable to give consent to participate in research and require additional protections to minimize their risk of harm. Given these conflicting positions, it is incumbent on researchers to develop an ethical protocol that considers this tension and collects the least amount of sensitive information about underage participants. While it may not be necessary for the researcher to request or obtain consent from the user, they should at least determine strategies to minimize the amount of information that is collected or stored by the research team to complete the study. For instance, not saving any HTML content and creating anonymous identifiers for each user would be a useful strategy to reduce the likelihood of user identification from stored data. Such a strategy is essential for studies focusing on deviant or criminal behaviors on- or off-line that may carry legal ramifications for participants. In turn, researchers may reduce the risk to juvenile participants over time by minimizing the potential for participant identification after the study is completed.

Lastly, there is always the potential that a researchers' involvement with a participant may be logged or captured by various platform operators. Social media sites and mobile phone service providers commonly engage in relatively invasive, covert forms of data collection about user activities (Andress & Winterfeld, 2013). Recent scandals involving Facebook's data collection, retention, and sharing of user information to third parties demonstrate that technology companies may not be

forthright in the extent to which users' behaviors are logged (e.g., Oremus, 2018). As a result, researchers may want to consider using encrypted communications applications and services that are difficult to track and minimize data retention, such as Telegram, so as to help promote secured information sharing with participants.

1.6 Risks to Researchers While in the Field

The rather commonplace nature of Internet use may lead some in the research community to assume that engaging in online research does not present the same risks to personal safety that may be present in fieldwork with gang members or drug dealers (see Jacobs, 1998; Decker & Wright, 1994). Individuals who attempt to interview or conduct ethnographic research of gang members and criminal actors place themselves in close proximity to motivated offenders and situations that increase the risk of threats, assaults, theft, and police encounters. The same is true with respect to online research, as time spent lurking in forums and websites used by criminal groups may increase the risk of harm to the researchers' online identity, as well as their computer hardware and software. As a result, care must be taken to minimize potential threats to privacy and digital safety, as well as overall network security.

One of the most important steps a researcher must take before engaging in online fieldwork is to make sure their computer's operating system, browsing software, and antivirus tools are completely up-to-date. Additionally, any security tools, ranging from antivirus to firewalls and scanning tools should be activated and set to automatically scan downloads and inbound Internet connections. These steps are not only foundational for general cybersecurity practice, but also essential in the event the researcher visits a site that has been compromised by computer hackers. This risk is proportional based on the types of sites one is studying, as the risk of infection dramatically increases when examining serious forms of cybercrime such as the sale of stolen personal data (Holt et al., 2016). At the same time, participants in a study who become dissatisfied with the researcher or want to show off their skills may utilize cyberattack tools to target a researcher or their institution (see Holt & Copes, 2010).

Additionally, it is vital that researchers clear the history and cache of their Web browser prior to and at the close of every research session to reduce the likelihood that personal data may be captured in some way by third-party cookie applications (Holt, 2010). The use of private, incognito, or other forms of browser behavior that reduces the history of user activities during a session are also helpful to reduce the amount of information captured on the researchers' machine. It may also be to the researchers' benefit to use a computer that contains minimal sensitive personal financial data, student information, or research data stored in memory on the local machine. Though seemingly extreme such a measure reduces the potential for data loss or violations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) or Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws, as well as

threats to the confidentiality and privacy of participants in other research projects (Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004).

Depending on the nature of the topic being studied, some researchers may also benefit from the use of tools to anonymize their location and Internet connection to minimize attribution to their specific locale or university network (see Hine, 2005; Holt, 2010). A research protocol examining serious hacker groups, pedophile communities, or certain forms of organized crime may increase the risk profile to the researchers' institution in the event any criminal behavior is observed (see Chu et al., 2010). Alternatively, if the researcher's computer is compromised, it may spread across the broader institutional network. To help minimize these risks, researchers can utilize a range of free products, such as TOR, which can hide the user's Internet connection and physical location and are relatively easy to use. As a more robust measure, an individual may also choose to use an external network connection, such as a cellular broadband Internet service, as opposed to their institutional network to access sensitive communities. Such steps can help minimize the extent of computer compromises which may affect the overall personal and network security posture of their organization (see also Holt & Bossler, 2016).

1.7 Discussion and Conclusions

As a whole, there is clear benefit from the use of online data generated from various forms of CMC for qualitative and quantitative analyses of criminological phenomena (DiMarco & DiMarco, 2003; Holt & Bossler, 2016; Quinn & Forsyth, 2013). Not only can we gain access to offenders' perspectives on delinquency, crime, and deviance, but also understand the influence of network relationships on behavior and ways that technology transforms the act of offending in general (Adler & Adler, 2005; Denney & Tewksbury, 2013; D'Ovidio, Mitman, El-Burki, & Shuman, 2009; Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Holt & Bossler, 2016; Jenkins, 2001; Turner, Copes, Kerley, & Warner, 2013; Wilson & Copes, 2005).

The relatively novel nature of online data is, however, challenging for scholars who must navigate the ethical and methodological challenges posed by this sort of data. Not only must researchers develop protocols that ensure best practices for data collection, but also identify strategies that may protect subjects through data storage techniques and in publications that differ from what is common in traditional research in physical spaces (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Flicker et al., 2004; Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2005; Holt, 2010). As a result, there is a need for continuous discussion in the research community as to the potential best practices for collection and analyses. Such discussion among researchers can increase an understanding of how to deal with the ethical and methodological challenges presented by constant shifts in technology use and the evolution of CMC platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and Telegram. In turn, this can promote diffusion of knowledge and increase the acceptance of online data sources as a legitimate form of data collection and analysis in criminology as a whole.

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Chapter 2

Ethical and Methodological Issues in Gang Ethnography in the Digital Age: Lessons from Four Studies in an Emerging Field



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and James Densley

2.1 Introduction

For nearly 100 years, ethnography has been a method synonymous with gang studies (Decker & Pyrooz, 2013). However, new technologies are changing what it means to conduct ethnography today—especially with gangs. With the narrowing of the digital divide, gang members have transplanted their criminal and symbolic activities onto the Internet and social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, which now constitute spaces where street culture and gang life thrive (for reviews, see Irwin-Rogers, Densley, & Pinkney, 2018; Peterson & Densley, 2017; Pyrooz & Moule, 2019). These spaces, in turn, provide real-time access to the lives of gang members and new content and collectable artifacts for analysis, from selfie photographs to YouTube rap videos to text and email exchanges. This chapter explores how gang ethnographers have thus far dealt with the integration of gangs and digital technology and shares some of the practical and ethical

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challenges we ourselves have experienced in this line of work. It also advances some recommendations for future research.

Ethnographers studying gangs have always faced distinct ethical and methodological challenges in their work as compared to other researchers (Durán, 2018), to the extent that some describe the process as “risky business” and “dancing with danger” (Baird, 2017; Koonings, Kruijt, & Rodgers, 2019). However, Internet usage among gang members and the subsequent need for gang ethnographers to both be present on the street and be active online creates unique challenges and opportunities, about which little has been explicitly written.

This chapter stems from an amalgamation of the authors’ experiences conducting ethnographic studies with gang-involved individuals in North America, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (e.g., Densley, 2013; Roks, 2016; Storrod, 2015; Urbanik, 2017). It explores how social media has shaped and defined our work to date and how it continues to increase the prospects of a comparative, multisite, multi-method gang research agenda that lives the mission of Eurogang (Esbensen & Maxson, 2018). This chapter outlines emerging issues in gang ethnography, namely how social media can *reveal* and *conceal* important gang processes and blur the boundaries between public and private life, and participant and observer.

We attribute our scholarly connections and collaborations—including this chapter—to recent Eurogang meetings which brought us together and relieved our feelings of isolation given our (at the time) rare methodological approaches and frustration with the lack of guidance for dizzying practical and ethical dilemmas. We hope this chapter serves as a “go-to” manual for researchers considering fusing or perhaps replacing traditional gang ethnography with a study of the digital streets, and that it will direct junior scholars to key works in this budding, yet still largely undeveloped area. However, before discussing our own fieldwork experiences with gangs online, we will first delineate common methodological approaches to the study of gang members and street-involved groups in the digital age.

2.2 Studying Gang Members and Street-Involved Groups Online

The online activities and artifacts of gang members and street-involved groups are increasingly the focus of empirical research. Most of the studies on the “digital street” to date are foundational and theoretical, rooted in the US experience (Lane, Ramirez, & Pearce, 2018; Lauger, Densley, & Moule, 2019; Stuart, 2019). Recently, Pyrooz and Moule (2019) proposed categorizing some of these works into three methodological strategies: “cyber-ethnographic research,” survey research methods, and “big data” analysis. Though a helpful start, these categorizations miss some important aspects of gang-involved individuals’ social media usage, which we attempt to more thoroughly tease out (see Table 2.1). We distinguish three types of studies on the social media use by gang members or street-involved groups:

Table 2.1 Approaches to the online study of gang members and street-involved groups

1. Where gang members or practitioners are asked about gang members' use of Internet or social media	2. Interpretation of the substance and meaning of gang artifacts—such as videos, tweets, and postings—observed in online platforms	3. Blends asking about gang members' activities online directly with analysis of online gang artifacts
<i>Interviews with gang members</i>	<i>Gangs' social media footprint</i>	<i>Online observation only</i>
Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Densley, 2013; King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013, 2014; Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2017; Pyrooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012	Patton et al. 2015; Balasuriya, Wijeratne, Doran, & Sheth, 2016	Frey, Patton, Gaskell, & McGregor, 2018; Patton, Pyrooz, Decker, Leonard, & Frey, 2019
Interviews with practitioners (no gang members)	Patton, Eschmann, Elsaesser, & Bocanegrad, 2017; Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017	Ethnographic studies— <i>one-way mirror</i> ^a
	Décary-Héту & Morselli, 2011; Morselli & Décary-Héту, 2013; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Lauger & Densley, 2018; Patton, Lane, Leonard, Macbeth, & Smith Lee, 2017; Patton et al., 2017; Van Hellemont, 2012; Womer & Bunker, 2010	Ethnographic studies— <i>glass window</i> ^b

Adapted in part from Pyrooz and Moule (2019)

^a One-way study of participants prior to field entry. Urban ethnographers can monitor and analyze the prospective participants' online presentations and interactions, but participants cannot "see" or interact with the ethnographer (Urbanik and Roks (2020))

^b Two-way observation, communication, and participation between urban ethnographers and their participants

1. Studies focused on asking current and former gang members or practitioners about their Internet usage or social media activities
2. Studies that focus on (the interpretation of the substance and meaning of) online gang artifacts, such as videos, tweets, and postings
3. Studies that showcase a mix of focusing on current and former gang members or street-oriented individuals and an analysis of online gang artifacts

First, we will outline categories one and two, with a critical lens to the strengths and weaknesses of these respective methodological approaches. Then, we will carefully consider the third category, devoting particular attention to the myriad ways scholars have wedded physical interview and observation with virtual content analyses.

One of the first documented studies on gangs online utilized a small survey which uncovered that 25% of gang members spent about 4 hours per week on the Internet, and nearly 50% of gang members accessed the Internet through community centers (King et al., 2007: S66). Pyrooz et al. (2015) used similar survey methods to connect with 585 respondents about their use of the Internet and their involvement in gangs. This research, part of a series of “Google ideas” studies on gangs online (Moule et al., 2013, 2014, 2017), found “parallels between gang identities and activities on the street and on social media” (Pyrooz et al., 2015: 479–482) and argued that gang-involved participants were more likely to use social media in support of criminal activities than non-gang-involved participants (see also, Patton et al., 2019: 3).

These studies created a baseline of knowledge about how gangs use the Internet, and emerged around the same time as qualitative research with gangs outside of the United States that incorporated some discussion of gang members’ Internet habits (Densley, 2013; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012). This first category also includes research that relies on interviews or focus groups with practitioners, like outreach workers and law enforcement officials (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Patton, Eschmann, et al., 2017). These collective works constitute important contributions to our understanding of how gang members use social media. However, the focus of these studies is on documenting what gang members *say* about their online activities and not on their *actual* online or street behavior, which we know can be inconsistent (Deutscher, 1966).

The second category of studies tries to make sense of the online world of gang- and street-involved individuals by analyzing gang artifacts, such as music videos, tweets, and postings from afar (e.g., Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Lauger & Densley, 2018). This category includes studies that employ learning algorithms and/or Web-scraping tools to obtain (sometimes, millions of) tweets and posts from different networking platforms (Balasuriya et al., 2016; Patton, Lane, et al., 2017), in addition to manual “netnography” of online communities (Kozinets, 2010) and qualitative “case studies” of gang-related digital communications (Patton, Patel, et al., 2017).

This methodological approach can be summarized as *ethnography at a distance* (Benedict, 1946; Mead & Métraux, 2000), since it does not necessitate a physical

field presence. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 2) argue that ethnography involves a mixture of “watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews.” An open question, therefore, is whether one can still claim to be doing ethnography if one cannot question their own research subjects. The fact that gang-related content online is typically heavily coded or layered with intentional misrepresentations and violent self-presentations (Stuart, 2019; Van Hellemont, 2012), to the extent that even “insiders” can have a hard time determining the true intent of posts or whether people really are who they say they are (Patton et al., 2019; Patton, Eschmann, et al., 2017), makes this question more pressing. Social media is used to populate gang databases and prosecute gang cases (Behrman, 2015; Lane et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2017), but questions remain about law enforcement’s ability “to reliably interpret peer-directed communication from a population they may have almost no contact with offline” (Lane, 2019: 147). The same holds true for researchers who are divorced from their subjects and may have limited context for localized slang, vernacular, street code, and digital/street behaviors. Hence, though scholars can certainly learn a lot from gang artifacts, with the absence of consultation with gang members and/or other “domain experts” (Frey et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2019) their conclusions are limited to what they can observe, and potentially mediated by their own biases and expectations.

The third category consists of studies that blend elements of the previous categories by examining *actual* online behaviors of gang- and street-involved individuals with interpretation of online gang artifacts. In addition to asking *how* gang members use social media, these studies also document and interpret the online content that gang members and street-involved persons produce (e.g., Pawelz & Elvers, 2018). Hence, they are able to more critically assess similarities and differences between what gang members and street-involved individuals say about the online world and how they actually behave online. For example, Storrod and Densley (2017) supplemented their focus groups with young people in an active gang area with a systematic social media content analysis of two local gangs’ digital artifacts.

Many of the studies in this last category are gang ethnographies. For much of ethnography’s history (e.g., Whyte, 1943), immersion within a space or group to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ lives required *physically* “being there” (Geertz, 1988). The important role that social media plays in shaping the lives of street-involved individuals has led urban ethnographers to recognize that the “real world” and “virtual world” are intimately entwined (Lane, 2019; Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018). The incorporation of the “digital street” into urban ethnography makes space for research roles that are not currently fleshed out in existing literature (Lane, 2019).

Therefore, Urbanik and Roks (2020) propose an addendum to the traditional typology of participant–observer roles in ethnographic fieldwork, that is (1) complete participant, (2) participant-as-observer, (3) observer-as-participant, and (4) complete observer (Gold, 1958). On the observant side of the continuum is the “one-way mirror,” which enables the one-way study of research participants via social media. When Van Hellemont (2015) and Van Hellemont and Densley (2019)

conducted an 18-month-long ethnography with an African gang in Brussels, for example, she extended her on-the-ground findings through careful deconstruction of 170 gang-related weblogs and analysis of 38 rap songs (Van Hellemont, 2012). Van Hellemont's work exemplifies the "one-way mirror"—she was able to observe her participants' online activity but her participants could not, in turn, "see" or interact with their observer.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, toward the participant side of research involvement, is the "glass window" approach, which allows for two-way observation; that is, communication and participation between researchers and their subjects. Lane's (2019) ethnographic study of street-oriented youth in New York City is a prime example. His participants were immediately made aware of his research intentions online, could interact with him on his personal social media account, and could even delete him and therefore opt-out of participating in his study. The "glass window" approach is qualitatively different from the "one-way mirror" because its reciprocal form of seeing and learning inherently produces greater transparency between researchers and their participants. It also potentially alters how researchers and participants interact with one another, which can shift roles and expectations in the field; something discussed in detail in the next section.

2.3 Unexpected Turns and Lessons Learned: Experiences from Four Studies

The abovementioned studies showcase the ways researchers have begun to study gangs and gang members in the digital age. Rarely, however, do researchers divulge exactly what goes into successfully conducting digitally enhanced ethnographic fieldwork with gangs. The handful of new media scholars, like us, who found themselves accidentally stumbling upon this novel mode of inquiry had limited—if any—methodological guidance to draw from (Urbanik & Roks, 2020). In what follows, therefore, we provide brief quasi-autoethnographies of our respective ethnographic studies on gangs in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Canada (for more details, see Densley, 2013; Roks, 2016; Storrod, 2015; Urbanik, 2017). We hope these "true confessions" (Ferrell & Hamm, 1998) will be helpful for scholars interested in navigating both the digital and physical streets in current and future research endeavors.

2.3.1 *James' Story: The Early Days of Gangland Online*

The title of Moule et al.'s (2013) paper "'from What the f#@% is a Facebook?' to 'Who doesn't use Facebook?'" pretty accurately summarizes the evolution I experienced firsthand during my fieldwork with gangs and gang-involved youth in London, UK, from late 2007 to early 2010 (Densley, 2013). When I first entered the field, social media was a minor story at best. Bebo and MySpace were the social networks

of choice, but still largely accessed from home computers because data was expensive and early second-generation (2G) Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) and third-generation (3G) mobile technologies were difficult to navigate the web with. Content posted online from the street also had to be captured on low megapixel camera phones with little scope to see in the dark—not ideal when gangs typically come out at night.

In November 2007 (6 months after its US launch), however, the first-generation iPhone entered the UK market, and everything changed. Priced at nearly £300 and with serious carrier contractual obligations, the first iPhone was prohibitively expensive and its functionality was limited so change was not immediate. But by the time my fieldwork was in full swing in summer 2008, change was inevitable: Carriers were experimenting with mobile broadband and faster data-transmission speeds and the second-generation iPhone's new operating system had introduced the App Store—Apple's distribution platform for third-party applications. From 2008 to 2010, the Nokia and Motorola flip phones in the pockets of my interviewees became iPhones, Androids, and BlackBerrys (coined "Crackberrys" because they were so addictive). Selfies became a thing. Facebook replaced MySpace.

At first this was innocent enough—gang members used their new smartphones much like non-gang members to text their friends, play video games, and stream music. But slowly I was introduced to the dark side of social media. How Snapchat's "self-destruct" messaging feature and BlackBerry Messenger's end-to-end encryption were useful for coordinating drug deals away from prying eyes (Densley, 2013: 99). How gang members could dial-up perceived disrespect by filming brief incursions on rival turf or tagging enemies online. How criminally-involved persons recorded each other's misdeeds to create digital *kompromat* and keep co-offenders honest. How young women and girls in the orbit of gangs found themselves naked and exposed online thanks to the "sextortion" of their supposed boyfriends (e.g., Densley, Davis, & Mason, 2013). Then there was a film posted to MySpace in 2008 where a boy was tortured and humiliated by members of a rival gang. And a YouTube rap video that got one brazen gang member arrested for brandishing a gun in public.

There was little guidance for navigating this brave new world because, with the exception of King et al. (2007), the literature on gangs and social media was yet to be written. Still, in 2 short years, social media went from novelty to normal and, in some cases, nuisance, for my interviewees. My research participants were living life on the street, but also on their phones and online, often at the same time. When a fight broke out, their instinct was now to film it or FaceTime it so others could watch. Gang members increasingly needed photo or video proof of everything they did, or their status claims were treated with skepticism. Nothing ever died—images lived in perpetuity online as ammunition for opponents to dredge up as convenient. As the technology improved, moreover, gangs began competing less for turf and more for clicks, creating a constant stream of content to engage audiences beyond the immediate neighborhood. Music videos went from low resolution and pixelated in 2008 to high definition and photoshopped in 2010 and gang narratives went from chaotic to choreographed in the process. The modern socially mediated landscape was coming into focus and the traditional gang ethnography was beginning to feel

as outdated as an old pager. The question plaguing me at the time was, “Am I the only person watching this?” Thankfully not.

2.3.2 *Robby’s Story: On the Streets and in the Feeds*

ES 200 bLOCC NEIGHBORHOOD CRIP says:
 so 200 Neighborhood is for anyone who claims da hood and puts in work
 ES 200 bLOCC NEIGHBORHOOD CRIP says:
 so Maintriad is da gang....200 is da set
 (MSN conversation with Raymond, January 21, 2007)

This private chat on MSN Messenger marks the beginning of my research on Dutch Crips gang leader and founder Raymond (a pseudonym). Over a period of 7 months in 2007, I combined offline in-depth interviews and observations with lengthy emails, casual chats on MSN, and the exchange of numerous pictures, sounds, and videos online to reconstruct both the gang’s history and Raymond’s personal criminal career for my Master’s thesis (see also, Roks & Densley, 2019). Raymond and I kept in touch afterward and, in 2011, I started my PhD fieldwork in the small neighborhood The Hague that his Rollin 200 Crips gang have been claiming as their “h200d” since the late 1980s (Roks, 2017).

At this time, Raymond, my gatekeeper, was in prison on drug charges. Owing to this recent law enforcement action, little to no other gang members were present in the h200d; a major setback at the start of my fieldwork, which forced me to think about alternative ways to collect data. For example, a youth worker introduced me to a group of 50 young people, aged between 12 and 20, that frequented the local youth center. Despite my efforts to build rapport, joining them in various sport and musical activities, most youth kept their distance. On good days, I was seen as one of the youth workers or ignored. On bad days, people yelled “snitch” or “po-po” whenever I entered or exited the building or, worse, called me “cop” to my face. Eventually, some youth warmed up to me, but because most did not, I was mostly limited to an observational field role (Gold, 1958), where I could observe the happenings at the youth center from a distance, but only had a limited amount of meaningful interactions with the youth. Although this approach yielded insights about street culture and rap music in the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent the lives of my research subjects, I felt my engagement lacked depth and authenticity.

Reviewing my field notes in February 2011, I was struck by the amount of time the young people spent on the youth center’s three outdated computers. I was most intrigued by a group laughing about a specific post on Hyves, the once popular social media platform. Because I missed the joke that day, I tried to find it online. At the same time, by substituting real names with a few street or gang names, I was able to locate online about a dozen youngsters from the neighborhood. Within hours, by scrolling through their timelines, browsing their friends’ lists, and searching tagged posts and pictures, I had a digital overview of almost all of the frequent visitors of the youth center. I was stunned by how much valuable information was

publicly available. From my computer at the university, I could trace their day-to-day whereabouts, their school, work, and leisure activities, and who they hung out, both online and off-line.

However, this was just part of the wonder of social media for criminological research. Some of the youngsters were quite open about their criminal involvement and run-ins with the law. Jack, for example, a 15-year old from the neighborhood, would keep his distance from me in the youth center, did his best not to acknowledge my presence, and even ignored my attempts to greet him with a fist bump. On his publicly available Twitter account, however, he gave a detailed overview of his criminal case proceeding, stemming from the initial charge at 08:49 to the final court decision at 13:09 later that day. Others would post pictures displaying drugs, firearms, and large sums of cash money, in addition to using the functionalities of the different social media platforms to request debit cards for phishing.

After these first strolls on the digital street, I incorporated social media into my ethnographic research strategy by analyzing Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram content from 40 street-oriented persons. Most accounts had public profiles, but I sent friend requests anyway, which were almost instantaneously accepted. For the most part, these informants were not part of the Rollin 200 Crips. In general, the gang members in my study were over 30 years old and less Internet savvy, barely using their social media accounts. During my fieldwork, I would use content on social media to initiate conversations or group discussion in real life, to ask clarification about specific terms in posts, in addition to using direct messages (DMs) to send interview requests.

Since this research strategy emerged organically, my own social media accounts contained both my fieldwork and personal contacts. At times friends would comment on my likes or digital interactions with some of my informants, who, for instance, congratulated me on the birth of my first daughter in 2013. During my fieldwork, I paid no mind to this. After my fieldwork, and a falling-out with gang leader Raymond over specific passages in the subsequent manuscript (Roks, 2017), however, my perspective changed:

Raymond: I gave you what you asked for
 Raymond: Now I want something in return
 Raymond: Give me their names
 Raymond: Before I go to the wrong people
 Raymond: Because this will be handled
 Raymond: I didn't let you came this close to let you disrespect me
 (WhatsApp conversation with Raymond, April 22, 2016)

This heated digital discussion led to an in-person confrontation with a younger member of the Crips at my workplace at the university, who rather menacingly told me, "*You know we know where you work right?*" Eventually, the issue with Raymond was resolved. However, the aftermath of this incident made me question the ways in which my personal and research life had become intertwined over the years. After my research, I was no longer physically present in the field, but digitally I still felt and was close to it. The only solution was to unfollow, unfriend, and even block certain informants.

2.3.3 *Marta's Story: "Yo, You Got Instagram?"*

Similar to other urban ethnographers who complemented their studies of gangs on the "street" with an analysis of their participant's digital lives, I began my fieldwork in Toronto's disadvantaged Regent Park neighborhood in 2013, interested not in social media but in how neighborhood revitalization was affecting local criminally-involved groups (Urbanik, 2018). Social media analysis was in its infancy at the time, and none of the training methods I underwent as a graduate student had exposed me to "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000); I didn't even know what that was!

By the summer of 2014, however, my research participants were expressing growing concerns about social media and warned that online "beefs" were having serious repercussions on the street. Though I was hearing about virtual interactions, I was not yet witnessing them unfold firsthand, which limited any broader contextual understanding of my participants' trepidations. One evening, this all changed. One of my key participants, Freestyle (17 years old), casually asked me, "Yo, you got Instagram?" When I accepted Freestyle's request to add me on social media, I did not think too much of the exchange or of the content on his profile, which featured images and videos of him in flashy clothing with stacks of money, references to illicit drugs, and evidence of being armed and dangerous. I soon connected with more and more of my participants via various social media platforms, and it occurred to me that their social media representations were quite similar to Freestyle's; the content I was observing did not exist in isolation—it comprised and was shaped by the broader social context of the "street code" (Anderson, 1999), though in digital form (Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018).

My seemingly trivial exchange with Freestyle exposed me to a new world of sociological insight, which ultimately changed the course of my research. More importantly, access to this novel social milieu afforded my ethnographic observations on the ground with greater nuance, and allowed me to maintain connections to my participants while I was away from the field. It soon became clear that for many criminally involved groups, "Online and offline environs are mutually constituted and evolve in tandem" (Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018: 15), and should thus be empirically investigated accordingly.

During my research, another unpredictable occurrence influenced my participants' social media representations. Much to my surprise, a few of these men achieved notable fame in Toronto's vibrant rap "microscene" (Harkness, 2013) and their newfound micro-celebrity extended their reputations across the country and beyond. They began deploying social media more frequently and strategically than before, which increased their online visibility to millions of views and tens of thousands of followers, thereby raising the stakes of their online activities.

For example, one of my participants posted several videos on Instagram insulting a rapper from outside the neighborhood and accusing him of owing him money. These widely broadcast affronts did not go unaddressed; the following week, the young man was beaten so badly he was hospitalized. In another instance, a rival

group robbed a prominent Regent Park rapper of his distinguishable gold chain, and bragged about the robbery online, before releasing a widely watched music video where they flaunted his cherished possession. Hence, while social media platforms allowed several of my participants to market themselves and their music to a vast audience, these same platforms eventually served to broadcast their “L’s” (losses) to thousands of viewers, thereby diminishing the “street capital” they worked so hard to attain (Harding, 2014; Urbanik, *forthcoming*). As I had connected with my participants online, I could witness the evolution of these “beefs” in real time, as well as their *dissolution* (see Stuart, 2019), which enriched my data collection and enhanced my ability to triangulate my findings.

At the same time, the popularity of social networking sites changed frequently and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram were continually updating existing communication features or adding new ones, which altered how users interacted with each other. For example, Instagram added a “Live” feature where users could stream video to followers and engage with them in real time. My participants started to stream videos of themselves using illicit narcotics, rapping, spending money, and “calling out” rivals. Shortly thereafter, Instagram allowed two users to stream videos simultaneously. Though my participants initially used this feature to publicly video-call with their friends, they quickly began to video-call their rivals to insult, threaten, and challenge them. Notably, these exchanges were often viewed by hundreds of unknown others, who were able to participate in—and often further aggravate—these online gang “beefs.” As a new media scholar, I needed to quickly adapt to these changes in the new media environment, and be just as flexible in my research process as my research participants were in real life, adopting new technologies that had important consequences for street dynamics.

2.3.4 *Michelle’s Story: Do No Harm*

I conducted my master’s thesis research, *Digital Artefact vs. Digital Fingerprint: An Ethnography of Gangs Online*, in 2015, at a time when high-speed Internet, cheap unlimited data plans, free Wi-Fi hotspots, and high-spec phones were all easily attainable. These factors coupled with the strict UK data privacy laws made social media surveillance for authorities problematic, and as a frontline practitioner working with young people involved in serious youth violence, I learned that the people who used social media the most—teenagers—were taking full advantage of the unsupervised digital terrain (Boyd, 2014). I also learned that social media was affecting young people’s physical and emotional well-being, especially young people involved in gangs, and I was keen to find out why.

My initial proposal was to conduct an ethnography of a pupil referral unit (a school for young people excluded from mainstream education), combining participant observation of students’ interactions in school with their interactions on social media. This would be supplemented with expert interviews of professionals around the children and in the broader context of the neighborhood to see how/when profes-

sionals, young people, and social media interacted. All the appropriate permissions were in place, but 1 month before the fieldwork was due to begin, the deputy headmaster of the school informed me that my research could not proceed owing to child protection policy. He was concerned about possible intrusion into students' personal lives and a lack of available resources to triage any observed/suspected harms or manage additional referrals to law enforcement and social services. He also argued that any referrals could cause conflict with parents and students, putting everyone in danger from potentially "angry and violent children."

To address these concerns, I made the difficult decision with my supervisor not to research the same people online as I did in person. To avoid a standalone "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000) that was otherwise detached from its local context, I triangulated social media analysis of gang artifacts with focus groups of young people and interviews with professionals (see Storrod & Densley, 2017). However, becoming a de facto covert researcher and "lurking" online (Richman, 2007) was a position I found to be both problematic and traumatic.

The principal aim of all research is to ensure that the subjects of research *and the researcher* are protected from harm that might result from their participation in the research (Freed-Taylor, 1994). My day-to-day knowledge and awareness as a practitioner afforded me a semi-insider position. However, not even 10 years' work experience could prepare me for being present with young people in digital space. Yes, I had listened to accounts of physical and sexual assaults, visited young people in hospital, tended to their injuries, even sat in on police interviews and court proceedings, but I had never actually observed the routine victimization of children and young people—by other children and young people—on this scale or on continuous loop. "Do no harm" did not account for the psychological trauma of watching hundreds of acts of extreme and graphic violence. In fact, the way in which the concept of "do no harm" was interpreted by all involved in the governance of my study was in relation to my physical, rather than emotional safety.

Faced with the sights, sounds, and emotions of peer-on-peer abuse, I also felt the urge to report concerns of significant harm to law enforcement and children's services following usual child protection protocols or submit an online disclosure to the Child Exploitation and Online Command, part of the UK's National Crime Agency. However, as I was now following young people that I did not know, my ability to intervene was limited. I could neither fully corroborate the facts nor identify the people I saw online because I did not have their real names or addresses. So began my construction of a "defensible position" (Yates, 2004) in studying and informing on criminal behavior online. Grounded in the knowledge that all the information I garnered was publicly available, authorities charged with policing the Internet in the interests of young people could have already been acting on the harm I was witnessing.

As I moved through my research, I took the opportunity to remind professionals who had a duty of care to children in their service that they should be reporting images or videos of abuse if they had knowledge of them. Following Lee's (1993) covert approach from *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*, I felt I was taking a "pragmatic" stance, whereby my defensible position openly acknowledged the neg-

ative aspects of my methodology. Well suited to academic enquiry, however, such an approach did not sit well with me as a practitioner, whose day job was to prevent violence and support victims.

When embarking on a digital ethnography with young people, there are always going to be additional concerns over their vulnerability, especially if we know those young people are involved in crime and victimization. These risks are never fully mitigated by the Institutional Review Board, the charge to “do no harm,” or even our own professional experience. Online methodology is still in its infancy. We need to remember that although a computer screen may protect us from physical harm, it is not an emotional shield. Just as digital ethnography challenges us to think differently about physical space and sharing a virtual environment with participants, we must also ensure that we challenge ourselves to think about sharing emotional space with participants on- and off-line. We should at all times ensure that we are doing no online harm to our participants or ourselves.

2.4 The Ethics of Gang Ethnography in the Social Media Age

As discussed, studying gangs and gang members online is relatively new, hence there is little written about its methods and ethics. As demonstrated throughout the case studies above, however, gang scholars are potentially flying blind into field-work sites that are shifting at a rapid pace, making it difficult to preempt all the issues that arise. The ethics of all research are complex, but when it comes to studying gangs online, it is crucial that researchers take the time to reflect on them in all aspects of the research process, from study design, to data collection and analysis, but also to dissemination, ensuring that an “aftercare plan” is in place (Samuel et al., 2018). The challenge is that university ethics committees and Institutional Review Boards that govern research may not be well equipped in these areas, offering inconsistent advice across countries and institutions, not least because social media is an emerging, contentious, and somewhat unknown entity. Just to provide a brief example, the authors of this chapter each had contrasting experiences with ethics approval: one did not have to submit a formal proposal or get ethics approval, while another’s research was completely dictated by what the ethics board would allow.

People involved in gangs are very often youth or vulnerable adults from marginalized communities (for a review, see Densley, 2018). As explored in Michelle’s case study, the age of participants alone can have a huge impact on our methodological decisions because we must extend special protections to safeguard young people from harm. Gang members also occupy spaces on- and off-line that are highly policed and excessively surveilled, in part due to the nature of their socioeconomic status and/or racial background (Patton, Brunton, et al., 2017; Rios, 2011). The Internet can create distance between a researcher and their subject, which has its advantages (Gold, 1958), but also it can exacerbate the sense of surveillance or

objectification felt by marginalized youth, resulting in abstracted or voyeuristic research. As discussed earlier in this chapter, utilizing ethnographic methods whereby participants are afforded the opportunity to openly interpret and explain their digital activities can mitigate these risks (Patton et al., 2019). Most gang researchers do not share the same demographics of the people they are studying in gangs, thus having their subjects actively participate in the research process is important to deconstruct power imbalances that could result in misinterpretation and harm.

To validate larger datasets and overcome misunderstandings during analysis, colleagues from Columbia University's SafeLAB employ young people who were formerly gang involved and from the geographical community that content is abstracted from as "domain experts" (Frey et al., 2018). The SafeLAB have also produced ethical guidelines for online research that "acknowledge that identifiable social media from marginalized communities can be used to criminalize and incarcerate communities of color" (<https://safelab.socialwork.columbia.edu/content/ethics>). Going forward, they aim to study youth violence on social media in a way that prioritizes privacy, transparency, and the needs of the communities that they study, and we concur with this approach (see Densley, 2019).

At the same time, we should consciously strive to decrease the potential for harm, including to our participants, ourselves, and/or the broader research community. We should remain aware of how our own social positions may influence our interactions, biases, interpretations, and observations in the field, and inform data analysis and triangulation. Not only can reflexivity attune us to emerging themes and silences in our data early on, but it can also highlight ethical dilemmas as they arise, allowing us to proactively modify our methodological approach to add greater protections for all involved. Taking fieldnotes can allow us to register and reflect on personal concerns, and regularly reviewing these can ensure that we are continuously assessing and reassessing our work, including our purpose, data collection process, methodology, and findings.

Being careful about the information we share at conferences and in publications can safeguard the anonymity of our participants. One way to do this is by ensuring that we are making any digital statements "un-Google-able" by changing words, memes, or emojis and excluding social media profile identifiers (Shklovski & Vertesi, 2012). Given that even an obscured face may still be identifiable owing to tattoos or the context of the image, do we need to include pictures of what we find online or are written descriptions sufficient?

Digital ethnographies also force gang researchers to reconsider research consent. When consent was provided by participants, did they truly understand how their quotes and pictures may be used and seen by others? What if they have since deleted digital artifacts but we continue to disseminate them. Is that fair? Is that consensual? Even when people consent to being part of the research and being "friends" with you online, do they always know and remember you are there watching? How do we consistently remind participants of our presence and the ongoing nature of ethnographic research? When we also consider that the participants lack control over

digital artifacts that are shared about them or featuring them, what is the cost to them to know that we saw something that may be traumatic for them, or us?

There are no easy answers to the questions posed here, especially because public posts are visible to anyone and are not considered protected. The inability to set hard boundaries around our online field sites and qualify who does and does not count as a research participant is another ongoing challenge. Consent may have been obtained for those we are directly studying, but what about the people they are friends with and those who are their followers or who comment on and share their posts? The very nature of social media is that it is social and fluid. Artifacts are meant to be interacted with, and often as researchers this is of primary interest to us. Consent for every interaction is illusive, but as established earlier in this ethics discussion, the people interacting with gang-related content online often are in need of protection owing to their age or marginalized social status. Thus, researchers must consider how they might remain ethical even if they are viewing public material or when consent is not needed or cannot be obtained.

2.5 Concluding Thoughts on the Future of Gang Ethnography

In this chapter we have touched upon the challenges and opportunities of gang ethnography in a digital age. However, there remains a significant necessity for greater scholarly consideration and collaboration examining the multiple facets of this novel research methodology in gang studies. Moving forward, the digital era calls for research methodologies that are able to grasp the realities of street life not just on the physical or digital streets, but simultaneously on the ground, in the feeds, and in the networks (Lane, 2019). This brings specific and to-date unexplored ethical dilemmas, and notably new dilemmas will continuously arise as social networking sites continue to evolve at rapid speed. In addition to incorporating suggestions for new media scholars throughout the body of this work, in the following text we provide broader recommendations for conducting gang research in the digital age.

1. Those intending to undertake digital research on gangs should consult with other scholars who have successfully deployed this methodology. At present, only limited methodological scholarship exists that can inform such research endeavors, so codified counsel remains limited, and many academic supervisors may not be privy to understanding the digital street. Hence at this point, scholars who have personally conducted similar types of work are best placed to provide methodological, ethical, and perhaps even technical guidance to those wishing to undertake such projects. As our own experiences demonstrate, we felt quite unprepared to engage in such forms of data collection, and this lack of guidance led us to make several errors during the course of our fieldwork. By fostering a collective environment of mutual support and counselling, not only can we enrich this growing field through novel insights, but also work together to ensure that we are

operating along similar, and stringent, ethical guidelines. The formation of a tightknit research community such as Eurogang will also ensure that we can broadly disperse our findings and become more aware about undertakings and developments in this quickly evolving field and research methodology.

2. In relation to the first suggestion, it is imperative to highlight that while social media platforms evolve at a dizzying pace, academic publishing is notoriously slow moving. The temporal disjuncture between fieldwork and knowledge dissemination is particularly disadvantageous for new media scholars, as the window between submitting a methodological or substantive piece in this field and having that knowledge shared with the broader academic (and practitioner) community can render any methodological guidance as obsolete, and can limit other scholars' abilities to build upon, test, and/or compare data, not least because the social networking sites—and their respective norms—under observation may no longer exist. Though we respect rigorous peer review, its unnecessarily lengthy process is a significant hindrance to building this important field and distributing methodological and ethical advice. Hence, we recommend posting preprints and working papers on online platforms, which allow for data sharing to solicit more timely feedback.
3. We encourage new media scholars studying the online world of gangs and street-involved youth to familiarize themselves with and keep abreast of the evolution of street lingo and its online analogues (i.e., the “real” meanings behind specific emojis or symbols). This type of media literacy is critical to ensuring that researchers correctly interpret social media posts and the broader contexts in which they exist. Our own research endeavors uncovered that beyond slang terms, missing context in posts can make meaning ambiguous, and the combination or order of emojis, symbols, words, and codes can drastically change the meaning of certain posts. Street-talk changes frequently in the real world and similar patterns can be noted online. Street-talk hasn't just been transplanted to social media platforms; social media platforms have given rise to new forms of “street talk,” which sometimes only vaguely resemble conversations on the street. If scholars are not adequately familiar with these, they may misinterpret their data or entirely overlook notable criminological and sociological phenomena in their study. This can not only have serious implications for the reliability and validity of our findings, but also have problematic implications for research interactions and dynamics in the physical field. Scholars unfamiliar with the particulars of “street talk” should consult “domain experts” (Frey et al., 2018).
4. Currently, there is a limited amount of comparative work in this field. Though gang scholars are increasingly attempting to compare and contrast their findings with others' work—in accordance with the Eurogang mandate (Esbensen & Maxson, 2018)—scholars examining the “digital streets” have not yet meaningfully begun to merge different theoretical, disciplinary, and cross-national research traditions (c.f., Sela-Shayovitz, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2016; Van Hellemond & Densley, 2019). This individualized approach hinders our ability to conduct comparative, multisite, multi-method research on how gangs manifest themselves online, and therefore also obfuscates important findings relating to broader

contextual, societal, and macro-level differences in the “digital street.” However, big data increase the prospects of ethnographic “global exchanges” (Fraser & Hagedorn, 2016) and interdisciplinary collaboration with data scientists and network analysts to help overcome age-old barriers to replication in gang research. Consequently, we suggest that new media scholars interested in this form of research should seriously consider collaborating with others in the field, which will (a) infuse this body of knowledge with greater nuance, (b) illuminate similarities and differences, (c) improve methodological training and approaches, (d) increase knowledge dissemination, and (e) consequently produce more rigorous research and transferable knowledge.

5. Studies in areas such as child protection, journalism, and law enforcement show repeated exposure to depictions of violent death, assault, and sexualized violence have a detrimental impact on well-being (see Beckett, 2018). Like professional content moderators, social media researchers can experience symptoms of generalized anxiety or secondary traumatic stress—a disorder that can result from observing firsthand trauma experienced by others and whose symptoms can be identical to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For these reasons, we recommend limiting exposure to disturbing material and encourage researchers to switch to other projects to get relief. Universities also have a moral duty to help any students or employees routinely exposed to violent imagery in the course of research, such as by providing workplace support, counselling sessions with trauma specialists, and permitting time off to recover.
6. With the growing concerns surrounding the often serious and sometimes even fatal implications of online gang dynamics, new media scholars, in particular, should work toward sharing their insights with practitioners and policy makers. Undoubtedly, social workers, violence prevention workers, school officials, law enforcement officials, and others could benefit from the knowledges these studies produce, and, can also share their own expertise which may inform and shape the project in notable ways. However, we urge scholars to consider the potential unintended consequences of such conversations or possible collaborations, with particular concern that they do not result in harm to their research participants and other disadvantaged groups, including but not limited to over-policing, criminal charges, school discipline, and increased stigmatization. Scholars also need to be mindful of when they initiate such relationships as some connections may impede research access all together (i.e., connections with law enforcement). Nevertheless, when appropriate, new media scholars should consider leaving their academic silos, as meaningful policy changes generally require cooperation between divergent groups.

Ultimately, this chapter has shed light on how conducting ethnographic research on gangs in the digital realm presents gang scholars with a nexus of new and unanticipated methodological and ethical challenges that have largely remained closeted from mainstream academic discussion, irrespective of the approach taken. The seriousness of these concerns and the immense potential for harm in digital research on gangs as evidenced by our own experiences coupled with the likelihood that gang

scholars will increasingly digitize their methods in the coming years necessitates broader dialogue on this topic. Indeed, gang scholars have yet to understand the full spectrum of the respective advantages and disadvantages of digitized gang studies, and the pace of technological innovation demands that we adjust our methodological approaches quickly in order to stay abreast of emerging digital milieus.

At the same time, the rapidity of such developments and our inherent hunger for uncovering and understanding new fragments of social interaction further amplifies existing complexities and risks associated with this type of empirical inquiry. While methodological guidelines may never be able to fully keep up with the pace of developments in the online realm, and social networking sites in particular, only through timely, sustained, and robust scholarly discussion can we work toward trying to mitigate the risks and benefits associated with ethnography in the twenty-first century. The Internet is not going away, and social media use continues to be a vital component for criminally involved individuals and groups, including gangs. As such, criminologists must continually assess what effect excluding or including social media has on the validity of their data and the broader knowledge base on gangs. For this is what it now means to study gangs in a digital age.

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Chapter 3

Researching Transnational Gangs as Agents of Mediation in the Digital Era



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3.1 Introduction

Gangs are gangs, wherever they are found. They represent a specific type or variety of society, and one thing that is particularly interesting about them is the fact that they are, in respect to their organization, so elementary, and in respect to their origin, so spontaneous. – (Robert E. Park, preface in Thrasher, 1927/2013, p. ix)

In the twenty-first century, profound societal changes seem to have altered the appearance of gangs in comparison to how they are depicted traditionally. The globalization of society suggests young people can be marginalized from an economic and social point of view, but not necessarily culturally or politically (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2008). Economic and social breakdowns in several countries meant that there are fewer opportunities available to young people in terms of well-paid jobs, which caused migration to other countries in order to establish a life plan using contemporary forms of travel. Furthermore, the digitalization of post-modern societies added a virtual global sphere where youth identity models circulate through the Internet.

This text is based on the approach adopted in the TRANSGANG project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's HORIZON 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 742705. The principal investigator is the last author of the article. The rest of the authors are members of the research team. Contact: transgang@upf.edu. Website: www.upf.edu/web/transgang.

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If we look at gang formations nowadays, we detect structural fluidity, significant geographic mobility and strong presence in social media. Many gangs are not strictly territorial, nor do they have a compact structure. Gangs today often seem more like nomadic identity clusters that mix elements from their respective countries of origin, from their host countries, but also from many other transnational styles that circulate through the Internet and social media. This phenomenon corresponds to the youth cultures of the global age more generally, which have been characterized as ‘hybrid identities’ (Nilan & Feixa, 2006).

To address the new challenges that twenty-first century gangs reveal, the aim of this chapter is to discuss gang definitions and propose a renewed transnational, intergenerational, intergeneric and transmedia approach for the gangs of the twenty-first century. The epistemological focus is also extended to include gang members’ attempts to work as agents of mediation. Firstly, a brief overview of different gang traditions worldwide is presented. Secondly, we conduct a review of the different attempts to propose a gang definition, from past approaches to more recent ones. Thirdly, we discuss the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) on gangs. Fourthly, the role of gang members as informal mediators is explored. Fifthly, a renewed theoretical approach is proposed in order to do research with gangs. The chapter is closed by a conclusion section addressing all the issues that have emerged throughout the chapter when talking about gang definitions: age, gender, geographical features, structure formation, digitalization, mediation, identities and resilience and resistance. All in all, our new approach allows us to obtain a more accurate picture of current offline and online urban street groups.

3.2 Subcultural Gang Traditions Worldwide: From Classical Gangs to Gangs 2.0

(...) a gang emerges when the youths in these areas, primarily those from the first and second generation, become frustrated and disillusioned upon realizing they are not likely to find jobs that can allow them to rise above the socioeconomic level attained by their parents. – (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 204)

In the history and evolution of youth street gangs worldwide, several subcultural traditions can be distinguished (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Feixa & López, 2014; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Matza, 1961; Venkatesh, 2009). The first one is the North American street gang tradition. This was closely linked to the process of urbanization in the United States and to the process of ‘magical recovery’ of the original ethnic identity by the second and third generations of young people with a migratory background. This trope of recovery was translated into the model of the territorial gang, well organized and basically composed by men: the classic object of urban ethnography (Klein, 1995; Thrasher, 1927/2013; Whyte, 1943/1972).

The second tradition is exemplified by Latin American gang traditions of different scale: *pandillas* and *naciones*. Here, a gang is a social street group organized in neighbourhoods with precise geographic boundaries. Nations represent a higher

level of gang organization, with hundreds of members. Although they may have some criminal connections, sociability is the main function of both groups. They create a distinctive lifestyle that resolves conflict through music and dance challenges. *Maras* are an extreme version of this tradition, arising in Central America in the post-war period (Feixa, 1998/2012; Perea, 2007).

The third tradition is represented by the European subcultures that young immigrants find when they arrive: global networks to allow gangs to pass from local gangs to global tribes (Esbensen & Maxson, 2012; Klein, Kerner, Maxson, & Weitekamp, 2001; Leccardi, 2016; Queirolo Palmas, 2016; Van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008).

The fourth tradition is represented by Arab youth subcultural traditions, including street vendors, football fans, rappers, *hittistes*¹ and *baltagiyya*.² In countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt, they emerge in a process of hybridization with their own cultural traditions of North Africa, marked by the importance of the family (Bayat, 2012; Camozzi et al., 2014; Nilan, 2016; Sánchez, 2010).

The fifth and most recent tradition is formed by the virtual global universes represented by youth identity models that circulate through the Internet. In the last decade there has been an evolution of gangs towards more complex forms of socialization (Fraser & Hagedorn, 2018; Hagedorn, 2007; Vigil, 2002). These ‘global gangs’ (or gangs 2.0) are no longer strictly territorial, nor do they have a compact structure. They are nomadic identity groups that mix elements of their respective countries of origin, of their host countries and of many other transnational styles that circulate through the Internet and social networks. These hybrid identities correspond to the youth cultures of the global era (Nilan & Feixa, 2006), where gangs’ cultural practices and creative products demand recognition for collective empowerment. As Manuel Castells (1996) argued over 20 years ago, the network society is a ‘space of flows’, exemplified by online connectivity. The ‘affordances’ (potentials, opportunities) of the Internet are crucial to the contemporary social practices of youth, including the constitution of gangs. These increasing possibilities, mainly for the favoured classes, create a new type of exclusion among the popular classes: not only technological exclusion, not having access to technology, but also a new kind of media literacy exclusion – not having all the necessary competences to make the most of ICTs.

The evolution among gangs, reflected by this fifth tradition, inevitably has consequences on the study and definition of gangs. It highlights the necessity of a new conceptual framework based on ethnographic evidence that helps to deal with the main defiance of the twenty-first century gangs.

¹In Algeria, literally ‘those leaning against the wall’, used to designate young people who spend the day on the street looking for means of subsistence. They move in groups and stand at strategic thoroughfares, so they know everything that is happening in the district and take advantage of it.

²In colloquial Egyptian, literally those who carry the axe, to designate the loyal servants of the Ottoman sultan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Currently it refers to groups of thugs or gangs, hired to attack regime objectors from the 1990s, when the Egyptian police decided to control them and turn them into a paramilitary corp.

3.3 Challenges for (Re)defining Gangs in the twenty-first century

There are group-like networks and behaviours at an incipient phase, even if media tend to identify them with the criminal and durable organizations similar to the North American gang pattern. – (Feixa, Canelles, Porzio, Recio, & Giliberti, 2008, p. 65)

According to Thrasher's definition, a gang is 'an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict' (Thrasher, 1927/2013, p. 57). Thrasher also points out that gangs, as forms of sociability, are characterized by a behaviour guided by face-to-face encounters, fights, urban spatial movement as a unit, conflicts with other agents and the planning of their actions. Thus, 'the result of this collective behaviour is the development of a tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit-de-corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory' (ibid.). In line with this approach, a gang can be characterized as an informal group of peers who are attached to a territory, in conflict with other peer groups and sometimes with adult institutions.

Although crime is not the main reason why gangs form, the police and political approaches in the United States have reinforced the criminal conceptualization of gangs. When delinquency was not considered as a fundamental attribute of youth street behaviour, other concepts were used, such as peer groups, street groups, subcultures, countercultures or lifestyles, among others, and the term gang was reserved for youth street groups whose members were mainly from minority, migrant or ethnic backgrounds. However, the criminological tradition has tended to use the term gang as a synonym of youth street group more or less linked to criminal activities.

Offering a gang definition with which all social actors (gang members, researchers, social workers, institutions, among others) can agree has always been a difficult challenge. Gangs are not static objects of study; instead gangs are 'dynamic, flexible and ever-changing' (Monti & Sanders, 1994, p. XI). In addition, terms and meanings may vary according to geographic locations and subcultural traditions, as seen in the previous section. Hence, during the twentieth and the twenty-first century, scholars have faced different challenges and have provided different approaches when trying to offer a conceptualization of gangs.

The first challenge is to decide how much we include by the way in which we define 'youth gangs'. Two approaches can be found among researchers: (1) offering wide definitions that gather more young people into the gangs' conceptual net and, on the other side, (2) offering a narrow approach, which usually involves focusing more on the illegal activities of the group, and, consequently, being a member of a gang is seen as a criminalized behaviour. This perspective is represented by academic researchers who apply Klein's definition, developed in the 1970s in Los Angeles: 'a gang is a group of young people that can be identified by: (a) being perceived as an aggregation different from the others in the neighbourhood, (b) recognizing themselves as a defined group, (c) being involved in various criminal episodes that generate a constant negative reaction of the neighbours and/or of the

services in charge of the application of the law' (Klein, 1971, p. 13). In this direction, the Eurogang network of researchers has decided on the following definition: 'a street gang (or troublesome youth group) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity' (Esbensen & Maxson, 2012, p. 5). These broad definitions focus the core criteria on durability, street-orientation, youth, identity and, most importantly, illegal activity.

The second challenge is to provide nuance and context in the conceptualization of gangs. If we only focus on gangs as a social problem, we do not pay attention to fundamental underlying issues like racism, poverty and social inequality. Scholars can also fail to capture the fluidity and contradiction inherent in gang identification. Furthermore, too narrow of a definition may prevent seeing that gangs can develop into either pro-social organizations or more organized criminal entities, and it may create an artificial sense of similarity between diverse cultural contexts.

A third challenge is how to study collective behaviour and group commitments while integrating personal experience and individual behaviour as well. The gang is often treated as an analytical frame about group status and relationships with other social subjects as individuals, criminalizing all the members. Here the focus is on collective behaviour and group engagements, and the personal experience is ignored. A good example of this is Miller's definition of a gang: 'A self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and control of a particular territory, facility, or enterprise' (Miller, 1992, p. 21).

The last critical challenge we would like to point out when trying to offer a gang definition is how to integrate and emphasize the creative and agency capacities of members of youth street organizations. The definitions that line up into this issue take gang's cultural productions and forms of sociability as resistance practices, contradictory and ambiguous, against a set of discrimination processes by culture, class, race and ethnicity. In this sense, Queirolo Palmas (2014, p. 23) defined gangs as 'urban youth groups that take shape in the interstices of a post-migration society, with their cultural practices and sometimes cooperative interactions that are sometimes conflicting, and which are designated by the thinking of the institutions and the media as gangs, a signifier associated with violence, crime and social danger'. A definition that attempts to collect all of these attributes is that offered by Brotherton and Barrios (2004, p. 23): 'groups formed in large part by young people and adults from marginalized classes, whose objective is to provide their members with an identity of resistance, an opportunity for empowerment both individually and collectively, of a possible 'voice' capable of challenging the dominant culture, of a refuge with respect to the tensions and sufferings of daily life in the ghetto and, finally, of a spiritual enclave in which practices and rituals considered sacred can be developed'. In this perspective, we find the Latin American tradition of gang studies, understanding gangs as social formations that attempt to build a cultural citizenship from the margins.

3.4 Gangs in a Digital Era: Online Gangs' Performance and Some Methodological Notes

In a world of networks, the ability to exercise control over others depends on two basic mechanisms: (a) the ability to constitute network(s) and to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network; and (b) the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation. – Castells (2011, p. 776)

The Internet and social media have shifted social relations and the way citizens interact, especially among young people. Urban gang members, usually formed by troublesome youths living in violent neighbourhoods, have introduced these new communicative trends into their daily experiences (Décary-Héту & Morselli, 2011; Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015). Gangs were present on the first social networks (such as Myspace), are on today's social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or, more recently, TikTok) and will probably be in the forthcoming new trends occurring within communication platforms. As in the offline sphere, online content reflects the gangs' activities and identity in the global and digital age. In contrast to traditional media, digital platforms offer youth street groups a place for cultural construction through their representations, self-representations and online practices.

The presence of gangs in these social media sites is widely known among scholars as 'Internet banging' (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013) or 'cyberbanging' (Morselli & Décary-Héту, 2013). Focusing on gangs' online activities, previous researches have shown that gangs use social media to promote gang affiliation, glorify gang life, display power, achieve gang notoriety by threatening or reporting participation in criminal acts, to create an information sharing network or even to support criminal activities (Patton et al., 2013; Pawelz & Elvers, 2018). Regarding criminal activities, many scholars have focused on exposing the relation between social media use and violence (Moule et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2015), concluding that gang members' behaviours on social media may include selling drugs, harassing, posting violent videos or downloading illegal music (Patton et al., 2014). However, although gang members' behaviour online can lead to criminal acts, Morselli and Décary-Héту (2013) point to different conclusions. According to these authors, gang presence on social media is more linked to individual displays than group awareness, and the use of social media is 'more likely to diffuse the non-criminal features of the group and the problems that they were facing from what they displayed as overzealous law-enforcement' (Morselli & Décary-Héту, 2013, p. 165). Nevertheless, as Morselli and Décary-Héту (2013, p. 166) highlighted, whereas street gangs are not proactively recruiting gang members, 'social networking sites are, however, creating a new venue for people who share or are sensitive to the values underlying street gang lifestyle to come together'.

Taking into account the studies presented, it is clear that studying gangs today must include the social media spaces of youth street group members. Not only is it

important to explore where gang members are in the virtual world, but also to understand what the significance of their consumption is, and the use and meaning of using social media in the construction of the lifestyle of youth street groups. The literature reveals different methodological approaches for studying online behaviour among gangs. On the one hand, we find studies asking gang members directly through interviews, observation, focus groups and surveys (Campana & Varese, 2018; Moule et al., 2014; Pawelz & Elvers, 2018; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012; Storrod & Densley, 2017; Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018). On the other hand, others go directly to the online sources using netnography, social network analysis, content analysis and other digital techniques (Balasuriya, Wijeratne, Doran, & Sheth, 2016; Décary-Héту & Morselli, 2011; Patton, MacBeth, Schoenebeck, Shear, & McKeown, 2018; Wijeratne, Doran, Sheth, & Dustin, 2015). Of course, both approaches can be combined, as some studies already do.

From our point of view, studying gangs online should include qualitative ethnographic analysis but also other approaches like informetric analysis, social media network analysis and content analysis, which are closer to sociology and media studies. Using other research methods does not imply losing the humanist focus. Following Kozinets' argumentation on how to conduct netnography: 'attention to the details and contexts of human stories and human understandings, of people using technologies, is the hallmark of genuine netnography' (2015, p. 2), we consider that a virtual ethnography approach must foresee human interaction between researchers and research subjects. This must imply involving gang members in the research process. Otherwise, the interpretation of the results, and even the netnography itself, would be a hard task to undertake. That is because, unlike other subjects of study (youth in general, urban tribes and so on), gangs usually try to hide their digital print or, at least, stay out of the police and institutions focus. It means that gangs are usually operating as what is known as covert networks (Oliver, Crossley, Edwards, Koskinen, & Everett, 2014).

There are three possible approaches when studying gangs online: (1) researching what people think about gangs (public opinion in social networks); (2) researching what gangs reveal about themselves (group identity construction in public online channels – Facebook pages, open personal profiles, etc.) and (3) researching what gang members show in their personal and private profiles (online life stories). This last approach can be difficult to implement and requires the researcher to be trusted by gang members. The first and second approaches will help researchers to show the interest and usefulness of the research to gang members; and this can in turn contribute to obtaining deeper gang member involvement, and, therefore, to easily reach the third approach. Of course, offline ethnography is always useful when talking about getting gang members' trust and involvement.

Adapting Patton et al.'s (2017) suggestions for collecting online data, we propose a three-step process to collect and work with online data that will help studying gangs in the digital era: first, identifying the key terms and phrases that may be associated with gang culture and behaviour with gang members' collaboration; second, in order to refine the term list and to have an interpretation frame, the list obtained needs to be compared with other documents related to the studied gang

(websites, texts); and third, based on the list of key terms, but also helped by gang members, public user accounts (on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) and Facebook pages or groups can be detected. All personal data must be anonymized to protect the researched subjects. This process must not only anonymize the data that can lead to profile identification but also the text information itself. That is to say, the text of analysis (a tweet in Twitter or a post in Facebook or Instagram) must be paraphrased in any publication in order to avoid any possible subsequent prosecution of gang members. After the anonymization process, data can be quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. Quantitative analysis will allow researchers to detect the gang network, the relations between internal and external actors of the gang, the interests of gang members and the most used keywords, among other features. On the other hand, qualitative analysis, which implies coding all the data with the help of gang members and local researchers, will allow researchers to have a better understanding of social media uses or topics discussed on social networks by gang members. The chosen analysis will vary depending on the aims of each research project.

3.5 Gang Members as Informal/Natural Mediators

In many respects, it would not be unfair to suggest that there is always a high level of interest in young people when they are perceived to be a problem because their behaviour causes concern to those with power and influence (the recent urban disorders in the UK are a good example), when their actions are seen as posing a risk to themselves (through their use of alcohol or drugs, for example) or when there are concerns about social integration and economic efficiency (manifest in terms of high levels of long-term unemployment or mismatches in the supply and demands for labour). – (White, 2013, p. 5)

‘Conflict is key, and crime a possibility, an event, a contingency that, nonetheless, does not saturate the way of life and the ordinary organization of the group’ (Queirolo Palmas, 2017, p. 66). Gangs fighting each other and taking conflicts to the streets is one of the ideas in the collective imagination that first comes to mind when gangs are named. The process of how that conflict is managed, however, is less known. ‘Mediation is used when enforcement is ineffective, and the consequences of the feud are likely to be seen in spiralling tit-for-tat crimes based on business disputes, petty rivalries or issues over respect’ (Peachey, 2014).

The position of gangs and gang members in mediation processes varies not only in each particular situation, society and conflict but even during processes, as positions may easily vary from party to mediator. Focus groups carried out in Madrid at the end of 2018 showed the informal and intercultural role (trans) gangs perform for their newly arrived members: ‘Since the people living in communities are newcomers, language barriers and out-group prejudices they experience make them feel socially isolated’ (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003, p. 204). The gang, through its senior members, may act as a bridge to reduce the culture shock for the members that have just recently arrived at the target society. From words and expressions that are different, to social ways, dealing with administrations or looking for a job, in many

cases gang members take the role of 'link-workers' for the members who need it. The 'hidden curriculum' of members of these transnational gangs includes abilities such as natural intercultural mediation, empathy and resilience, as well as first-hand knowledge of the origin culture and the migration experience.

Gangs as natural mediators appear here, although it is possible that these agents do not know that what is being performed is a mediation process, but when internal conflicts are solved without the need of drastic solutions, we can infer that the opposed factions have been able to reach an agreement. As in any other kind of association, from parent associations in schools to political parties, in a youth street organization, there are as many opinions as members, and not all of them have the same strength within the group. Also, a respected member of the group or community usually has the role of a socially established mediator. Thus, however difficult it may be to comply with the principles of Western mediation, this leadership helps prevent major conflicts most of the time. This is why it is not unusual for the authorities to try to establish relationships with group leaders to gain access to the gang and to avoid larger consequences. In fact, experience tells us that when these groups are left without leadership due to persecution or imprisonment, far from disappearing or maintaining a low profile, the chaos caused by the most rebellious members can be amplified due to the lack of internal control.

In contexts where there is no or little state control, gangs can be found organizing basic aspects of everyday life, such as different groups selling goods in a market or occupying the public space. On many occasions the distribution does not follow power relations or the need to impose one group over the rest, but to an interest in avoiding conflict between groups. What has been called the 'second economy' has its own ways of management: 'The second economy was only one component of the second society, which included a second public, a second culture, a second social consciousness and a second sphere of socio-political interactions. It was an inter-related sphere of alternative interests, organized along different principles' (Singerman & Bencomo, 1996, p. 242).

In other occasions, gangs want to pacify/formalize their relationship with local/national administrations, and they need, in turn, a valid mediator: they have become a party. Regarding experiences of success and failure with gangs and mediation, both the relationships and the results of mediation processes will depend greatly on the sociocultural and political contexts of the settings in which the mediation takes place. There is, in a mediation process, an important lack of balance in power relationships that should not be underestimated, and that is key to how the process turns out: authorities here have the power of granting (or not) the legalization/recognition of the gang, while the gang's only strength is to offer their intention to denounce violence.

It is common for youth street groups to relate to each other beyond conflict and competitiveness, both among members and between two groups. Common backgrounds, shared public spaces and similar life experiences and expectations tend to bridge the gap. Where these characteristics appear, it is usual to find that either temporally or in the long term, gangs can reach agreements to work together in the pursuit of social benefits for their communities. This was the case, for example,

during the earthquake in Mexico in 2017: youth street groups were among the first to collaborate in rescuing and helping victims. When a gang tries to ‘enter’ the system, however, there are several inconveniences that not all members are ready to take on, from the loss of secrecy or invisibility, to distrust in authorities and administrations. With the realization that legalization is not a panacea for their everyday problems, some members can become more reticent about it. Young people in gangs, like young people in general, have future expectations, either positive or negative. When social conditions do not present them with attractive or at least viable ways of socio-economic progress, however, many members can get disappointed both with the process and with the system.

We can conclude here that mediation as a resource for conflict management is an interesting tool with possibilities for improving the relationships between the gang and its immediate context, with other gangs, with authorities and even within the gang. This is approachable from many perspectives and possible to implement in any of the studied contexts due to its intersectionality and implementation possibilities. Moreover, it is important not to underestimate the ability members of the migrant community may have to act as mediators in benefit not only of their community but of society as a whole. Too often in the past, local and national administrations have forgotten this, and the role of mediator has been filled by an expert in the field who belonged only to the receiving community.

3.6 Defining 2.0 Gangs: Beyond Criminological Perspectives

Anyone who has studied gangs over a period of time will admit that the more one studies them, the more complex they are. At best, we can come to understand a bit about certain features of gangs at given points of time. Gangs are dynamic, flexible and ever-changing. – (Monti & Sanders, 1994, p. XI)

Pursuing current characteristics of twenty-first century gangs requires a renewed theoretical perspective that includes the use of social networks and the role of some members as mediators. Based on the evidences established from ethnographic research in diasporic situations, as in the case of the Latin Kings in Barcelona, we proposed the concept of ‘Gangs-In-Process’ (Feixa et al., 2008). This concept refers to groups in which networks and behaviours are at an incipient phase, even if media tend to identify them with criminal and durable organizations similar to the North American gang pattern. ‘Gangs-In-Process’ are street-oriented youth groups, with names, symbols and long-time traditions, composed by youths from deprived social backgrounds. Some of their members have connections with illegal activities, even if these activities are not part of the core group identity (Feixa et al., 2008, p. 65).

In order to make our contributions to the gang definition literature, and taking the idea of ‘Gangs-In-Process’ as a starting point, our theoretical perspective proposes to use the generic term ‘youth street group’ to refer to any gathering of young people – according to the definition of youth that exists in each context – who recognize themselves as a group and who use the public space, physical or virtual, to meet.

Adding the society-network context and the potential role of gang members as mediators to Thrasher's classic definition, we propose considering the gang not as a sole model but as a 'continuum' (see Fig. 3.1). At one extreme we would find, always ideally, the classic gangs based on illegal activities and not only formed by young people – like the *bacrim* in Colombia, the *maras* in El Salvador, the *tcharmil* in Morocco and the *quinquis* in Spain. At the other extreme, we would find youth subcultures based on leisure and economic activities – like the *vatos locos* in the Mexican American border, the heavies in Europe and the rappers in North Africa. In the middle there are a variety of hybrid groups that combine both strategies – like the *naciones* in Latin America, the *hittistes* in North Africa and the *bandas latinas* in South Europe.

Taking into account all the exposed reflections, we propose an update to the classic gang definition by adding the following nuances (in bold):

A **(transnational)** gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and later integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following type of behaviour: face-to-face **(and online)** encounters, fights **(and fun)**, movement through space as if it were a unit **(and searches for intimate spaces)**, conflicts **(and alliances)** with similar groups and planning. The result of this collective behaviour is the development of a tradition, a non-reflexive internal structure **(and the establishment of rules to regulate exchanges with other gangs and institutions)**, esprit-de-corps, moral solidarity, group consciousness and an identity linked to territory **(in their homeland, in their new land or in cyberspace)**.

To further develop the new contributions (in bold), we may say that gangs in the digital age are characterized by:

1. **Transnational connections** between countries of origin and diasporic situations, as consequences of migration processes. As the ethnographic works of Burawoy (1998, 2009) point out, there are global 'forces, connections and imaginations' in which one can perceive, through deep observation, increasingly interconnected, though disparate, social realities. Today, the transnational connections can be more easily sustained thanks to the facilities of movement of persons, and to
2. Private and public **online encounters** allowed by the wide diffusion of ICTs which break the sense of territory and time. The meetings can therefore be both offline and online. As a matter of fact, as seen before in this chapter, gang



Fig. 3.1 The TRANSGANG Continuum: gang identity not as a sole model but as a continuum

members' behaviour on the digital sphere is now inevitably part of the gang identity as a group.

3. On the other hand, the activities of the gang are focused on **non-criminal activities**. Although, as individuals, gang members can commit delinquent acts, it does not imply that delinquency is the main *raison d'être* of the gang. In line with this argumentation and with one of the challenges previously detected in this chapter (see Sect. 3) when facing the conceptualization of gangs, we propose to reflect the collective awareness of the gang but also
4. The search for **intimate and individual spaces** that allow gang members to develop their own yearnings. Again, as seen in the previous section about gangs as mediators, the hidden curriculum of members of these transnational gangs includes abilities such as resilience, resistance and intercultural mediation. Resilience as an affective, cognitive, relational and behavioural process that combines effective skills as a response to a situation of risk or adversity. And resistance as a (sub)cultural movement that opposes the dominant or hegemonic culture. Gangs question and –directly or indirectly – confront the established social order, which generates in them dissatisfaction, discomfort, frustration, indignation or resistance. This resistance can be translated into the capacity to empower and transform their own lives and reality in a tangible and concrete way, building new social relationships and new ways of life. Some forms of resistance are channelled and materialized through the body, everyday objects, clothing, music, dance, parties, words and aesthetic values, among others. The figure of gang members as natural mediators appears here, and, consequently, gangs are capable to create
5. **Alliances with other gangs and groups**, and also between society (institutions, police, citizens, social workers) and newcomer migrants or gang members themselves when arriving at the new context or country of reception. Gangs can not only mediate but also participate on
6. **Processes of social recognition** (e.g. legalization, truces, interventions in media, cultural creativity experiences, etc.) regardless where the gang is; and finally
7. Developing **translocal territorial identities** and links defined by ITC and personal mobilities that trespass the national borders, creating a new 'street-corner-society' in between the homeland, the new land and the cyberspace.

From this new adapted definition, there are different indicators that allow informal youth street associations to be included as research subjects of gang studies. Unlike previous research, a gang can include deviant behaviour but also nondeviant behaviour and people of different generations (adolescents and young adults), genders (men, women and LGBTI) and ethnic, social and territorial origins. Consequently, their identity unit will be based on common rituals and symbols that form the basis of an imagined community that establishes limits for group membership (Barth, 1969). The proposed conceptualization and the theoretical operationalization make it possible to differentiate street gangs from organized crime or from transnational criminal organizations, including terrorist cells, but also from informal groups without stable organization, grouped exclusively around leisure. In

short, we consider a gang as a dynamic cultural formation in a context of exclusion and social transformation. Youth street groups can both evolve towards more associative, cultural or sports forms, as well as specialize in some kind of crime.

3.7 Conclusion: Gang Research as an Empowerment Action

The usual policy of boy's work agencies has been to redirect the activities of existing gangs into wholesome channels by some sort of supervision. While this method is difficult and not always successful, its usefulness has been conclusively demonstrated by many Chicago agencies... – (Thrasher, 1927/2013, p. 508)

The link of gang research with social intervention has been a continuous principle from the beginning of empirical investigations. Not by chance the fourth and last part of Thrasher's book, *The Gang* (1927/2013), is dedicated to 'The Gang Problem', including an entire chapter entitled 'Attacking the problem', in which he describes experiences of transforming the gang through agencies like the Young Men's Christian Association, the Boy Scouts of America, the settlements, the parks, the playgrounds, the Boy's Brotherhood Republic and Chicago's Boys Clubs. Even if the author recognized that 'the politicians and saloon-keepers have also learned the trick of taking over these gangs and making clubs out of them, but their motives had usually been rather more for their own aggrandizement than for the good of the boys' (Thrasher, 1927/2013, p. 510), he also pointed out the treatment of gang members as individuals. He dedicated the rest of his life to using education as a powerful tool to help street kids (Merico, 2018; Rodgers, 2015). The reformist approach of the Chicago School has been criticized by labelling theories and by critical criminology, but also by those approaches that only aim to 'suppress gangs'. Our research experiences among gangs are based on the principle of mutual respect, involved research and consensual intervention (Feixa, Porzio, & Recio, 2006; Queirolo Palmas, 2016). Gang research should try to maintain a balance between resistance and resilience, starting from the principle that the goal is not to end gangs but to transform them from the inside and give an opportunity to their members.

As seen in this chapter, traditionally, a youth gang has been typically understood as a small delinquent group of young men based in a locality. The focus has been on crime and violence. Where there has been acknowledgement of larger-sized gangs with a greater geographical range, the emphasis has still been primarily on violence and crime. Less attention has been paid to migration (rural-urban, transnational) and to the economies of gangs: that is, how members and local communities gain a variety of benefits. Gangs have also shown specific cultural practices and creative outputs. These, too, require recognition and highlight the need of new ways of talking about transnational youth gangs in the global context.

This chapter set out to fill the gaps detected in the conceptualization of gang studies by proposing a new theoretical perspective. The definition we have developed in this chapter is being implemented in the TRANSGANG project (Feixa et al., 2019) and has strong implications for practitioners and professionals working

in law enforcement or public policy or with at-risk youth/young adults and for academic disciplines, such as Criminology, Social Work, Sociology or Anthropology interested in youth street groups. The definition *sets criminalization views aside and deals with inclusive and positive aspects of gang membership*, trying to positivize the marginalized position of gangs within the social structure. Some research focuses on proactive experiences in gang behaviour and policies (Leinfelt & Rostami, 2012; Venkatesh, 2009), but very few studies systematically compare such aspects in order to find variants and invariants in the evolution or in the reversal of the criminal gang model. Our theoretical position comes together with two new concepts when approaching the study of gangs: resilience and resistance. Our perspective aims to recognize *youth street groups as forms of youth culture to resist hegemonic discourses and practices and as social resilience institutions to deal with and fight against stigmatization*. Here, researchers have room to participate in this process including gang members as the main protagonists when researching twenty-first century gangs. This approach responds to the general concern among ethnographers that research should not use informants simply as sources of information; but rather, from an ethical perspective, the research should serve the interests of those who agree to participate. In this way, *the research process is transformed into empowering social action for young group members through their involvement in the entire research process* from the very beginning until the presentation of results. Although it is unclear if empowerment is a reality for those who participate in research or just an outcome of the researcher's imagination, our ambition is to make youth street group members visible as agents of mediation.

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Chapter 4

Women and Gangs in the Digital Media: A Distorted Image?



Ellen Van Damme and Willian Carballo

4.1 Introduction

The evolution of gangs in Central America, since the foundation of the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and the Eighteenth Street Gang (Barrio 18) in the 1960s–1980s in Los Angeles, to the introduction of these gangs in postwar Central America since the 1990s, has been well documented in the literature (Cruz, 2010; Martínez D'aubuisson, 2015; Rodgers & Baird, 2015). While gender differences and the increasing role of women in these gangs remain a blind spot within academic research (Santacruz Giralt & Ranum, 2010), media coverage on women in gangs has increased over the years (Estrada, 2017). Within this media coverage, one can observe a binary discourse whereby women are categorized as either victims or perpetrators (Derluyn, Vandenhole, Parmentier, & Mels, 2015). On the one hand, women are labeled as victims who are being forcibly recruited or abducted by the gangs and within the patriarchal gang structure used for sexual exploitation, human trafficking, domestic labor and drug dealing (Estrada, 2018). On the other hand, women are labeled as perpetrators of violence, extortion, and murder, whereby they are being considered equally as cruel as the male gang members, even though they also suffer violence within this patriarchal structure (Ventas, 2017).

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© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020

C. Melde, F. Weerman (eds.), *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47214-6_4

In recognizing the tendency of news media in the region to focus on sensational stories (Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo, & Salaverría, 2018), which can lead to a distorted image of reality, and in the case of the gangs even to moral panic (Cohen, 2002), the aim of this paper is to analyze news media on women and gangs in Central America scientifically, for which we also draw on our experience in the study of women and gangs in the region through online and offline sources. In addition to filling this gap in the research literature, we furthermore hope to better contextualize these news reports, which politicians often feel obliged to react. By offering a more inclusive perspective on the issue of women and gangs, such research can be used as a much needed resource for public policy making.

In this paper we examine the following research questions: (1) Is recent (January 1st – December 31st of 2018) media coverage on women and gangs in Central America based in reality, or is it based on a rather paternalistic and distorted image? (2) Are there systematic differences in media coverage of women and gangs in El Salvador and Honduras? We focus our research on media coverage in El Salvador and Honduras, because these two Central American countries have the highest homicide rates and gang presence in the region (Team, 2017). We proceed with a brief review of the literature before discussing our data and methods and research findings.

4.2 State of the Literature

Women in Central American gangs are generally not subject to scientific research. One of the first academic studies which focused specifically on female gang members is produced by the University Institute of Public Opinion of the Central American University “José Simeón Cañas” (Santacruz Giralt & Ranum, 2010), which examined female gang members in prison. In recent years, the interest in researching women and gangs in Central America has increased a little, although many studies are primarily based on secondary sources (Sampó, 2016; Santacruz Giralt, 2019). Consequently, our knowledge on women and gangs relies upon research that focused mainly on male gang members yet included limited information on the role of women in the gang, in addition to studies performed by (international) NGOs (e.g., Interpeace, 2012) and information gleaned from mass media. With these limitations in mind, it is clear that “women are present in multiple ways in the lives of gang members, either as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, friends or fellow gang members” (Aguilar Umaña & Ridders, 2012, p. 6). Their role in the gang, therefore, is worthy of further understanding, starting from how they get involved with gangs, their positions and roles in the gang, and the potential evolution of their roles and responsibilities in these groups.

Consistent with international research (e.g., Miller, 2001), popular discourse suggests girls have two options to join a gang in Central America: either being “beaten-in” (like the boys) or being “sexed-in.” The girls could choose a beating of 13 (MS-13) or 18 (Barrio 18) seconds, depending on the gang, or have sex with

several gang members for the same amount of time, i.e., being “gang raped” (López Calvo & Santos Pejic, 2013). The imprisoned women Santacruz Giralt and Ranum (2010) interviewed in El Salvador all claimed to have been initiated via a beating, although two of the interviewees refused to answer the question, and the overall sample was very limited. According to Santacruz Giralt and Ranum (2010), the initiation rite of having sex or being gang raped is rather a myth “that has contributed to stigmatizing the image of women gang-members as mere sexual objects for their gang-partners” (p. 183). Being beaten-in is far more respected by both female and male gang members than to be sexed-in. Notwithstanding the latter, other researchers have observed that “many female gang members provide sex, forced or consensual, for the male membership of the *clica*” (Brenneman, 2012, p. 35). Despite this evidence, mass media tends to reinforce the image of girls being gang-raped as an initiation rite by suggesting it is more common than that of the group beating (e.g., Lacey, 2008).

According to past studies, women rarely hold positions of power or authority in the gang. However, by having a relationship with a gang leader, it has been suggested that females can avoid the persistent sexual degradation and pressures to have sex with the male gang members and thus can enjoy certain privileges within the gang (Brenneman, 2012). The question, then, remains: can women only play a supportive role in gangs by contributing to the male members’ profile and identity (cf. Baird, 2015) or is there such a thing as an equal and respected female gang identity? In contrast to other cases in Latin America, for example, Colombia (Baird, 2015), in Central America it is indeed more common that women are recruited in the gang as active members (López Calvo & Santos Pejic, 2013). In this regard, according to López Calvo and Santos Pejic (2013), the role of women in gangs can be divided into three categories: active gang members (*mareras*), gang members’ girlfriends (*hainas*), or victims, the latter being most common, in their view. In some respects, however, it can seem impossible to distinguish one category from another. Since *mareras* are often only allowed to have relationships with boys from the gang – as opposed to *mareros* who seek their girlfriends outside the gang (Aguilar Umaña & Rikkers, 2012) – a *marera* could at the same time be a *haina*. This dual status is thus possible, despite the fact the latter concept seems to ascribe less agency than being a *marera*. Furthermore, the literature also suggests there is often a clear distinction between so-called internal victims and external victims. Internal victims suffer violence at the hand of fellow gang members and are viewed as belonging to the gang (Baird, 2015). External victims, on the other hand, do not directly belong to the gang. External victims are “women in the community outside the *maras*” (López Calvo & Santos Pejic, 2013), who become the victim of (sometimes extreme cruel and sadistic) gang violence, rape, and human trafficking with the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor (López Calvo & Santos Pejic, 2013).

Regarding the division of roles and responsibilities, literature suggests that the *mareras* and *hainas* perform the same tasks as within traditional households, such as “acting as carriers for their partners and the group, cooking and looking after the injured or ill,” but also “being messengers, following potential victims, conducting surveillance and receiving payments for activities carried out by their male peers

such as extortion, assault and trafficking” (López Calvo & Santos Pejic, 2013, n.p.). Since women raise less suspicion toward outsiders than men, they are often used to carry weapons, collect extortion money, and deal or transport drugs, often as “drug mules,” inside their bodies (Baird, 2015; Brenneman, 2012; Campbell, 1990; Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Yagoub, 2016). The girlfriends and wives of imprisoned gang members are also required to visit their spouses and deliver them messages and money from the gang (López Calvo & Santos Pejic, 2013).

In sum, research shows that the division of roles between men and women in the gang mirrors traditional gender roles in society. Or as Brenneman (2012) suggested, “the gang reproduces the patriarchal structure of Central American society” (p. 36). But how does this patriarchal culture play out in the media? How are female gang members described in the media in Honduras versus El Salvador, and what does it tell us about the situation of girls and women in these two highly patriarchal societies that are both affected by gangs?

4.3 Methodology

To determine whether the media coverage on women and gangs in Central America should be perceived as the reality or as a distorted image shaped by the paternalistic culture of the region, we chose to analyze online media coverage on women and gangs in El Salvador and Honduras, the two countries known to have the most gang members and the highest homicide rates in Central America (Insight Crime, 2015; UNODC, 2019; Valencia, 2018).¹ To conduct a diversified analysis of the media coverage on women and gangs, we chose to focus on three types of digital newspapers: yellow (sensationalist), least yellow (sensationalist), and investigative/research-based newspapers. These categories were chosen based upon a common understanding that the news reporting in these countries is highly sensationalized and at the same time aligned with the government (Pérez & Carballo, 2013), except for the investigative/research-based newspapers. For the sake of managing the amount of articles available, only articles published online between January 1st and December 31st of 2018 were selected. For Honduras, we choose to focus on two of the most important and most read newspapers in the country: *La Tribuna* and *El Heraldo* (laprensa.news, n.d.). Taking into account that all mass newspapers in Honduras are sensationalist, *La Tribuna* is perceived as being most sensationalist, as opposed to *El Heraldo* which is perceived as being less sensationalist (Nos Queda Claro, 2016). We add the most renowned independent research-oriented newspaper, *El Pulso*, to counter and compare with the sensationalist mass news outlets.

In total, after entering in the search engine the following concepts, *maras*, *pan-dillas*, Honduras, Barrio 18, Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13, *pan-dilleros*, *mareros*,

¹ Statistics on gang members are highly controversial, given there is no agreed upon definition of gang membership, and there is reason to believe some of the gang statistics may be falsified in the region (Van Damme, 2017).

marera, *pandillera*, we found 223 news articles published between January 1st and December 31st of 2018. By reducing that number only to those journalistic notes referring to women and female gang members, the sample was reduced to 64 items. Of these, 18 were from *La Tribuna*, 36 from *El Heraldo*, and 10 from *El Pulso*.

In the case of El Salvador, three digital media outlets were taken into account under the same parameters mentioned above. These were *La Prensa Gráfica*, *La Página*, and *Factum*. The first two are among the 10 most visited Salvadoran news websites, according to the Alexia.com metrics website, while *Factum*, although they do not appear in this top 10, is one of the most renowned independent research-oriented newspapers in the region. Altogether, after entering in the search engine the words *maras*, *gangs*, *Barrio 18*, *Mara Salvatrucha*, MS-13, *gang members*, *mare-ros*, *marera* or *gang girl*, we found 704 news articles published during 2018. By reducing that number only to those journalistic notes referring to female gang members, the sample was reduced to 30 items. Of these, 29 were from *La Prensa Gráfica* and 1 from *La Página*. *Factum*'s search engine did not show any articles on the topic during the period studied.

For the analysis of our data, we used the methodology proposed by Gutiérrez (2010), which was based on the deep hermeneutics of Thompson (1993, in Gutiérrez, 2010). This methodology is comprised of four levels. First, the reconstruction of the conditions to build a discourse: Who is the speaker? To whom is it directed? What is the speaker talking about? From where do they speak? What is the situation at the moment it is released? Second, the iconic or visual level. This includes the material aspect: location, extension and typographical variations, and the metatext (illustrations, photographs, tables, and cartoons). Third, the discursive level, which includes the micro linguistic plane (the use of pronouns such as they or us, temporal indices such as yesterday and now, and the manifestation of the attitude or relation of the subject of enunciation toward the enunciated and its interlocutor) and the macro discursive plane (discursive operations, description, interpretation, appreciation, explicit structuring of the discourse). Finally, we discuss the level of interpretation, in which the interpretation of all levels are integrated. In addition to that, we add a critical analysis throughout this paper, which is based on our own knowledge and experience of researching women and gangs in the region. Since the past 5 to 7 years, the authors have been studying gangs in Central America for their master's and PhD studies. Our studies consist of media content analysis, as well as interviews and ethnographic field research (Carballo, 2016; Van Damme, 2019).

4.4 Results

We discuss, for each country separately, the four characteristics of online media coverage as mentioned above, after which we discuss this critically in relation to each other and the state of the literature.

4.4.1 Honduras

I. The reconstruction of the conditions of speech production.

There are clear differences in the reconstruction of the conditions of speech production between the yellow and the investigative news outlets. Yellow *La Tribuna* produces much shorter (about a paragraph) articles about the facts and with more explicit bloody pictures. *El Heraldo*, which is slightly less yellow though still sensationalist, tries to tell a story, to move the reader to feel sorry about the victims and fuel anger toward the perpetrators. For example, the headline “Gang members kill woman and force their family to leave their home” is accompanied with a picture showing a moving truck surrounded by military police members in one of the outskirts of the capital (Heraldo, 2018i). In this regard, the newspapers maintain a very dichotomous victim-perpetrator discourse, with articles focusing on either victims of gang violence or the gang members (perpetrators of gang violence), without problematizing this dichotomy. Although the words victims and perpetrators are not always literally used, articles refer to the family, teachers, pupils/students, girlfriends and youngsters as victims, and gang members as perpetrators. For example, “Dismembered in 11 pieces [they] leave [behind] youngster when he was going to visit [his] girlfriend” (Tribuna, 2018d), or “Gang members frighten school students in Comayagua” (Tribuna, 2018e). Both newspapers are directed toward a broad populist public. *El Pulso*, on the other hand, produces much longer articles which critically discuss the topics and is much more internationally oriented (mainly on the relationships between Honduras/Central America and the USA).

II. The iconic level.

The pictures used in the articles of *La Tribuna* and *El Heraldo* are generally sensationalistic and do not shy away from showing blood and dead bodies. The articles, and hence the pictures, focused on either the “perpetrators” (alleged gang members) or “victims.” The pictures utilized show the faces and upper bodies of handcuffed gang suspects in front of such things as a police poster or behind a table that displays the alleged evidence of gang activities: money, drugs, guns, bullets, police/army uniforms and bulletproof vests, mobile phones, etc. Other examples include complete body pictures of alleged gang members who are being “caught in the act” and taken away by two police officers. Alleged female gang members are always accompanied by female police officers, indicative of the Honduran policy that only women can physically accompany and search alleged female arrestees. When posing with the evidence for the press, men are often stripped from their top to show the presence (or absence) of gang-related tattoos, while women are never stripped, and minors’ faces are covered or turned toward the wall.

Female gang members, as opposed to male members, are generally shown to be very femininely dressed, compared to the boys/men who often wear more baggy clothes. The victim-perpetrator dichotomy is also visibly gendered. When the focus of the article is on the crime or perpetrators, there are more men in the picture, whereas women living in poverty/humility are portrayed in the stories of

(secondary) victims. The school environment, besides the communities and police stations, forms another important scene to describe gang violence. These images are also gendered: young girls wearing (public) school uniforms are centralized within the image and their faces not visible. School boys, on the other hand, are divided into two categories: the good/innocent student who is killed by a gang, which is portrayed with a decent and formal picture, while a youngster who is being killed in a poor marginalized gang neighborhood, and hence (allegedly) accused of gang affiliation, is portrayed with stereotypical gang images (i.e., a strict look, metal chain, baggy clothes), without recognizing his or her merits as a (good) student.

While it can of course not be checked by the reader whether or not the victim was a good student, this kind of discourse is implemented when talking about a youngster who was being assassinated and did not belong to the gang. It is taken for granted that the victim in this case was a good student, while the same discourse is not implemented when the young person assassinated is a gang member. For example, on May 25, *Heraldo*, 2018d, *El Heraldo* published an article entitled “Mareros kill a university student for the love of a young woman in San Pedro Sula.” The head image of the article shows the smiling face of a young man wearing a black T-shirt. The article focused extensively on the assassinated young man’s study merits, stating “he was a student with academic excellence.” Although, as such, this has nothing to do with his gang-related murder, this kind of speech tries to heighten the compassion with the victim, the young man, and fuel anger toward the perpetrators, the gang members (cf. *supra*).

Finally, the research-oriented news outlet *El Pulso* uses less sensational or bloody pictures and focuses more on the text. At the same time, however, when using pictures in articles related to gang members, they use old pictures from heavily tattooed gang members, which is much less common today.² Only one of the ten analyzed articles of *El Pulso* shows two pictures of a crime scene, which are used in an article about femicide (Pulso, 2018c). The first picture shows a body covered with a white cloth and a group of people looking at it from behind a yellow ribbon. The other picture shows two dead bodies, supposedly of women, but this is not visible, and a female forensic police officer sitting behind the victims. This second picture, however, was not taken by *El Pulso* itself but showed a reference to *El Heraldo*. Also in *El Heraldo*, the pictures of corpses seem to be reserved for articles about femicides and the assassination of women. On June 5, 2018, the front picture of the article on the impunity of femicides shows the covered body of a woman, from which only a foot with blood spatters is uncovered. Two weeks later, another picture of a supposed female’s dead body is shown, stating “The young woman was leaving her house when she was shot” (Heraldo, 2018f). *El Pulso*’s articles did not include any sensational pictures of gang members being arrested or transported,

²Gang members in Central America stopped tattooing themselves in highly visible areas (in the face, on their arms, etc.) since the passage of laws that imposed serious consequences for gang behaviors beginning in the 2000s. Gang tattoos are restricted to the chest or back or, with the younger generation, have disappeared.

while this is the most common picture used by *El Heraldo* (17 of the 36 analyzed articles) and *La Tribuna* (9 of the 18 analyzed articles).

III. The discursive level.

While the research-oriented outlet *El Pulso* provides more in-depth analysis of news stories, the yellow outlets *La Tribuna* and *El Heraldo* tend to remain on the descriptive level, whereby they provide an unambiguous description of the situation. The articles explain in detail, with the appropriate jargon, the modus operandi, and characteristics of the gangs. They do not shy away from giving complete names, nicknames, ages, addresses, and other personal details of the people who are at the focus of the article. Although the *Mara Salvatrucha 13* is supposed to be the biggest gang in the country and region, most articles relate to members of the Eighteenth Street Gang (*Barrio 18*) who are arrested for drug dealing but, in addition, are suspected of other criminal acts such as car theft and homicide.

The general discourse adopted by the media is one of differentiating between “us” and “them” (“other” living in dangerous communities), or the distinction between “normal citizens” and “gang members.” Within this othering, the responsibility of the (gang) problem is also externalized toward another third party, e.g., the government is to blame for not investing enough in schools to keep children off the street. Furthermore, there is a clear differentiation between “perpetrators” and “victims.” While the perpetrators are generally arbitrarily labeled as male gang members, the so-called victims are mostly children, young girls, and women, and the sanctified figures of the poor hardworking single mother, though rarely (young) men, are portrayed as victims. Moreover, when a woman was killed, the gender of the victim is explicitly stated in the title, which is seldom the case for men. This, again, raises the impression that killing a woman is more harmful than killing a man.

The language used in the articles is clearly gendered and confirms the macho image regarding gangs, embedded in a patriarchal society. Although general (supposed gender-neutral) words, such as *jovencitos* (youngsters) and *niños* (children), are used to refer to gang members, by default they refer to male gang members. For example, on February 15, *Heraldo*, 2018a, *El Heraldo* wrote an article entitled *Familia se refugia en posta por amenaza de pandilleros* (Family takes refuge in police post for threat of gang members). Here, *pandilleros* can refer to men only or men and women. It is only when reading the article that it becomes clear it is about men only: *varios hombres encapuchados* (several masked men). It is gender specified when referring to female gang members, e.g., *presunta integrante* (presumed member) and *la fémina* (the female). When female gang members among male gang members are captured, special mention is made of the female gang members. For example, on March 7, *Tribuna*, 2018a, *La Tribuna* published an article entitled *Con droga atrapan a tres integrantes de la mara 18* (Three members of the 18 gang are caught with drugs). In the first sentence of the article, they make clear special attention goes to one of the three members, who is a girl: *Tres integrantes de la mara 18, entre ellos una joven cabecilla de la pandilla, fueron capturados en posesión de droga* (Three members of the 18 gang, including a young female leader of the gang, were captured in possession of drugs). This shows that men are still a default focus

of gang-related media reporting, and the role of women in gangs is portrayed as something new or exceptional, hence worth mentioning. In the same line, ranks of male gang members are seldom focused upon, whereas women with the highest rank, referred to only in the title of one article by *El Heraldo* (2018b, March 7), form the focus of the article, given women in high positions in gangs are perceived as exceptional: *Capturan integrantes de la pandilla 18 en la colonia Flor del Campo; marera tiene rango de “alondra”* (They capture members of the 18 gang in the Flor del Campo neighborhood; Marera has the rank of “lark”). The female gang leading rank, according to this article, is called “alondra” in Spanish.

Fieldwork in the region by the current authors (Carballo, 2016; Van Damme, 2019) has also suggested a rise in the phenomenon of women in gangs over recent years, as suggested in reporting on female gang members in the news media. This increased attention focuses not only on female “victims” of gang violence, but news outlets are eager to portray a cruel image of female gang members, which in the past was taken more for granted as regards to male gang members. Female gang members, like their male counterparts, are reported to commit similar gang-related crimes, such as assassination, drug dealing, and extortion, but the fact that it is a woman committing them seemingly raises the necessity for more concern. For example, on April 18, *Tribuna*, 2018c, *La Tribuna* published an article entitled *Capturada por diferentes ilícitos “La Mala” de la 18* (“The Bad One” of the 18 is captured for different crimes). It could be argued that by default all gang members who are being chased by the police are dangerous; however, the article puts special emphasis on the dangerousness of this 18-year-old girl by stating she is *una peligrosa integrante de la estructura criminal de la pandilla 18* (a dangerous member of the criminal structure of the 18 gang).

Furthermore, although task wise female and male gang members are reported similarly, there is a very paternalistic view regarding the relationships between both genders. A common example is the boyfriend of a girl, who lives in a gang neighborhood, who was killed because a gang member from that neighborhood is in love with the girl and does not want the boyfriend, who supposedly resides in another neighborhood owned by a rival gang, to enter the girl’s (and gang’s) neighborhood. Consequently, the girl is portrayed as an actor without a free will or choice, who is submissive to the will of men. On May 25, 2018, *El Heraldo* published an article entitled *Mareros matan a un Universitario por el amor de una joven en San Pedro Sula* (Gang members kill a University student for the love of a young woman in San Pedro Sula). The article narrates that *el estudiante había sido amenazado para que evitara ir a dejar a la casa a su novia. Finalmente los delincuentes lo ultimaron* (the student had been threatened to avoid dropping off his girlfriend at home. Finally, the criminals killed him). The article furthermore explains that *las pesquisas policiales indican que la amenaza se la mandaron los mareros porque uno de los miembros está enamorado de la novia de Hernández* (police investigations indicate that the threat was sent by the mareros because one of the members is in love with Hernández’s girlfriend). Similarly, on June 28, 2018, *La Tribuna*’s article entitled *Desmembrado en 11 pedazos dejan joven cuando iba a visitar novia* (Dismembered in 11 pieces [they] leave [behind] youngster when he was going to visit [his]

girlfriend) indicated that *supuestamente la fémina de nombre aún desconocido también mantenía relaciones con unos pandilleros que operan en la citada zona capitalina* (supposedly the female of which the name is still unknown also maintained relations with gang members operating in the aforementioned capital zone). Not only the fact that the young man who was dating a girl who “belongs” to the gang played a role in his assassination, also the fact that he was living in a neighborhood where the rival gang rules: *Según algunas hipótesis, los criminales acabaron con la vida del joven porque, en primer lugar, sostenía una relación sentimental con una mujer del “barrio” y porque se fue a meter a la zona equivocada o prohibida, ya que era residente de otro sector donde operan “maras” rivales o contrarias* (According to some hypotheses, the criminals took the life of the young man because, in the first place, he had a sentimental relationship with a woman from the “neighborhood” [i.e. the gang] and because he went to the wrong or forbidden zone, since he was a resident of another sector where rival or opposite “gangs” operate).

Another example of paternalistic imaging is the fact that the girlfriends of gang members are mentioned and labeled as such, whereas boyfriends of gang members are not named this way. This gives the impression that one of the main positions of women in relation to gangs is that of being the girlfriend/lover of male gang members, whereas, at the same time, the girls can also be gang members. For example, on September 7, *Heraldo*, 2018g, *El Heraldo* published an article entitled *Capturan a pareja sentimental de un peligroso cabecilla de la pandilla 18* (They capture a sentimental partner of a dangerous leader of the 18 gang). Although the girl was captured along with two other youngsters for extortion, at no point in time is she being referred to as a gang member. Girls are not only stripped from their agency, some newspaper articles even raise the impression that they are to blame for being “good looking” and thus attractive for male gang members. For example, two teenage single mothers were killed by a gang, because they did not respond to the flirtations of gang members: *Por negarse a ser cortejadas por mareros habrían asesinado a amigas en Villa Los Laureles* (For refusing to be courted by mareros they killed friends in Villa Los Laureles) (*Heraldo*, 2018j). This discourse places the responsibility of the femicides with the girls: *El no aceptar cortejos de presuntos pandilleros sería la razón por las que dos jovencitas fueron asesinadas a disparos* (For not accepting courtships of alleged gang members two young girls were shot dead). Seemingly, the role of the girls is to obey and respond to the flirtations of men, instead of placing the responsibility for the actions on the perpetrators. The latter message could call for free will and equal rights of both genders, but the current news reporting is confirming and even supporting the existing inequality.³

A common theme in articles, focused on (young) mothers, is the importance of the mother figure in taking care of the children, which is not stressed with regard to men. Hence, one can observe a hierarchy in the descriptions of homicides: killing a mother is worse than killing a childless woman, which by default is more cruel than killing a man. The patriarchy, however, also takes into account the respect for the

³ See also the *Yo No Quiero Ser Violada* – movement (Bohórquez Alvarenga, 2018).

mother figure. Older female gang members are represented, by their alleged nickname, as mother figures or ladies who need to be respected, e.g., *la Doña* (the Lady) and *la Madre* (the Mother), as opposed to older male members who are not named this way and generally are ascribed harsher/less comforting nicknames.

In conclusion, there is a predominant focus on women's positions and roles in relation to male gang members. From women who visit male gang members in prison to transporting drugs and messages to women who flee from gangs as "victims" of gang violence, their relationship to men is regularly noted. Boys or men who flee for the same reasons are reported to have fled from the gangs for unsettled issues or because they do not want to be recruited by the gang, whereas girls or women who flee from the gangs are reported to do so to avoid sexual (coerced) relationships with (male) gang members (CIPPDV, 2015; Salido Amoroto, 2018). This portrays women as victims and men as perpetrators, although the boys who flee as such are also victims of gang violence. Again, as mentioned above, this shows how the dichotomous conceptualization between victims and perpetrators is untenable in the discussion on gang violence.

IV. The interpretation level.

A critical view on the news outlets in Honduras makes clear that they are highly patriarchal and not so critical. *El Pulso*, being more independent and research-oriented, is probably the exception in this regard. Police corruption is less critically described in other newspapers, which are largely controlled by the government. When police corruption is mentioned, it is framed in a positive story, for example, when corrupt police officers are captured, or as regards to the police depuration. For example, on April 11, *Tribuna*, 2018b, *La Tribuna* published an exceptionally large article (10 pages) on a public interview given by president Juan Orlando Hernández about police reformation. Although the article talks about a police body which needed depuration due to corruption, the article frames it in a positive way and entitles *Presidente Hernández: "Hoy contamos con policías eficientes, confiables y cercanos a su gente"* (President Hernández: "Today we have efficient and reliable police, close to its people"). *El Pulso*, on October 7, 2018b, made a critical reflection on the role of the government vis-à-vis the gangs when the United Nations confirmed president Hernández's discourse regarding the gangs as human rights violators: *Relatoría Especial de Naciones Unidas reconoce que maras y pandillas son violadores de DD.HH.* (United Nations Special Rapporteur recognizes that gangs are violators of human rights). With this recognition, Hernández de facto receives support for his *mano dura* approach toward the gangs.

Also, the police are portrayed as saviors/protectors of "good" citizens against the "bad" gangs, whereas on the other hand the highly corrupted police is involved with the gangs and is moreover held responsible for gang-related murders (Andino Mencía, 2016; Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1999; Insight Crime, 2015; Nazario, 2019). Clear examples of the interlinkages between the under and upper world are the gang members who are being caught with heavy military or police firearms and bulletproof vests, which are not stolen but bought from or lent/given to gang members by police officers. Moreover, people reported to have

denounced gang activities to the police find themselves in a precarious position, as the police are highly mistrusted, given they would much rather inform the gang of who denounced them, instead of investigating the complaint. *El Pulso* does not shy away from critically analyzing the possible interlinkages between politicians and gangs or organized crime. For example, on February 15, 2018a, they published an article entitled *¿Maras, pandillas y crimen organizado en la política de Honduras?* (Maras, pandillas and organized crime in Honduran politics?).

Another common theme is that parents and teachers are portrayed as principal figures to protect children against gangs. Such a monolithic depiction is not reflective of the high levels of domestic violence and weak educational institutions which, among other issues, push children/youngsters toward gangs. At the same time, teachers are threatened by the gang if they do not comply with the gang's will, or, for example, if they do not let a gang member or his/her family pass in school, making the teachers' discretionary space dependent on the wishes of local gangs (Van Damme, 2019). As narrated by *El Heraldo* on September 9, 2018h, *identificaron que grupos criminales han logrado infiltrarse en el interior de escuelas, influyendo en las decisiones de maestros y directores [...] los miembros de bandas criminales reclutan, vigilan y promueven la venta de drogas a menores de edad, también extorsionan a maestros y estudiantes* (they identified that criminal groups have managed to infiltrate in schools, influencing the decisions of teachers and principals [...] members of criminal gangs recruit, monitor and promote the sale of drugs to minors, they also extort money from teachers and students). The feelings of insecurity at school have grown to a demand for a "school police," which ought to protect the students (2018c).

4.4.2 *El Salvador*

I. The reconstruction of the conditions of speech production.

Almost all news articles about female gang members found in the established sample of El Salvador media were produced by *La Prensa Gráfica*. It is a printed media outlet founded more than a century ago that migrated to digital reporting at the end of the last century. In printed version it is considered one of the two most important media, while on the internet it is also one of the most read news sites, along with the digital-founded news outlet *La Página* – the other news outlet studied. Both media publish daily news about violence, mainly carried out by alleged gang members, although they are not always careful to call them "presumed" gang members.

The analyzed publications belong to the period when then president of El Salvador called for a "war against gangs," which implied repressive actions against these groups. This, in turn, involved the response of the gangs, attacking and killing police and military agents (Cornejo & Pino, 2016). Both media have evolved in their approach to *maras* as a topic. *La Prensa Gráfica*, for example, made the

editorial decision to censor the tattoos of the gang members so as not to contribute to further exposing their symbols; whereas *La Página*, in the early 2010s, used the verb “to eliminate” exclusively to refer to murdered gang members (not so for other citizens, such as police officers), a practice that is no longer performed. The other news outlet, *Factum*, in which notes on gang members were not found within the studied period, usually opts for chronicles and in-depth reports to address the issue of violence, trying to cite as many sources as possible on the information they publish.⁴

II. The iconic level.

When it comes to news about the presentation of people captured by the police, there is no differentiation between how men and women are shown in the images. It is important to remember that, in El Salvador, the National Civil Police often makes massive presentations of alleged gang members, in which they place several captured people (sometimes up to dozens of them) against a wall for photojournalists to take pictures of them handcuffed. Sometimes the police make them pose wearing white clothes, the uniform given to detainees. It is these kinds of pictures which usually accompany the news. In them, men and women are mixed equally. If women were not in their white clothes yet, then they are shown wearing the clothes they were wearing at the time of the capture. On the other hand, when the article is about the story of a particular gang member, they show mostly photos of posed portraits or close-ups of the protagonist woman.

Other issues related to the gendered visual depiction of gang members are not well developed, nor do there appear to be differences regarding the news about male gang members. In the studied sample, however, there are no multimedia resources (such as photo galleries, videos, infographics, etc.), only written articles in a traditional sense (such as publishing the same article in print media and the internet). Most of them are short notes, without any textual element that stands out, which made analysis at this level difficult to accomplish.

III. The discursive level.

One of the most important aspects found regarding the discursive level has to do with the non-visibility of gang women in the articles (mainly in the headlines) about captures of gang members, even when there are women among the accused. For example, in an article of *La Prensa Gráfica*, the headline was “An international leader of the MS-13 was captured” (Calderón, 2018a, November 10). However, the dominant image is a composition of two photographs that includes a female presence in the event: one pictured the leader and another “his life partner” (sentimental partner), as explained in the caption. In other cases, the headline is written in masculine “4 homicides are attributed to a male gang member,” but in the summary

⁴It is important to clarify that, in December of 2017, *Factum* had published a report specifically on women who are forced to become nannies of gang members’ children; and months ago (in 2019), they have published a story about how women live and die in the gangs. Not being included within the dates of the sample, such articles were not taken into account for this analysis.

lines below, the female complement is explained: “A man and a woman were detained with him. Weapons and drugs were confiscated” (Rivas, 2018, October 6), the article adds, while it includes a photograph where the woman appears in the foreground.

In the examples mentioned, the women involved do not appear in the headline, but there are references to them inside the article. In other cases, however, the entire article uses only male adjectives (in Spanish, adjectives, according to how they are written, qualify only men or only women). Thus, journalists write *pandillero* (male gang member), *capturado* (caught), or *implicado* (implicated) without making any reference to women (*pandillera*, *capturada*, etc.). However, when observing the image that illustrates each news article, several women are prominent among the “captured men.” The note prefers to use words like “structures” or “groups outside the law” as a resource to implicitly speak of both female and male members within that plurality.

Another important aspect has to do with the nouns and adjectives assigned to female gang members. They appear in the studied sample like “life partner,” “gangster’s girlfriend,” “gangster’s woman,” “gangster’s wife,” or “gangster’s daughter.” The opposite does not happen. That is, there is no news that refers to any involved or captured man as “husband of a female gang member” or “boyfriend of a female gang member.” In this way, the vision of a woman as a “companion” and in the shadow of a man is reinforced. The most emblematic example in this regard is a series of articles published in June 2018 by *La Prensa Gráfica*, about the capture of a gang member whose wife owns a dining room installed in an allocation of the National Civil Police (PNC), where police officers buy their food. “At the time of his arrest, Najarro was accompanied by María Virginia Campos, who claimed to be his wife and the owner of the coffee shop located in the police headquarters,” described an article (Ortiz, 2018, June 11). Another exemplary headline was “Woman would have killed a newborn out of fear of a gang member” (Barahona, 2018, May 11). This article stated that the alleged murderer “has a 3-year-old son, procreated with a gang member who is in prison, so that the second pregnancy was the product of another relationship and she was afraid that the gang member would know.”

Finally, it is important to mention that specific notes about female gang members as the protagonist were detected (6 of the 30 items studied corresponding to this category). These articles focused on facts associated with incidents in which females are the main defendants; such as “Female gangster pleads guilty to murder of young Salvadoran woman Damaris Reyes in the U.S.,” published in *La Prensa Gráfica* (Calderón, 2018b, January 8). Or an exceptional report entitled “‘All believe that only men join the gangs’: the feared female gang member who says that the prison changed her life,” (Redacción-BBC 2018, March, 20) published by the same newspaper. This article tells the story of Nequela Whittaker, who now works with young people and girls on the streets to try to prevent them from following the criminal path. It is important to note how, in this case, it is associated with women with characteristics normally attributed to men in the rest of the articles examined: feared, murder, and captured. Women in these articles are directly named “female gang

members,” because the police source labels them like that or their tattoos are associated with gangs. It is important to note that, both in the case of male gang members and female gang members, a verification process by the journalist is missing to verify whether the accused is part of a gang or not. In general, most journalists only blindly publish what the police say and rarely question or verify on their own.

IV. The interpretation level.

From the previous two levels, it can be inferred that there is, in the case of El Salvador, a tendency to subordinate the role of female gang members relative to male gang members. This is visible both in the invisibility of women in the articles, despite being part of the same criminal structure composed of both genders (as inferred from the photos) – and in the adjectives or nouns used to refer to them. Thus, it can be established that the press, at least in the sample studied, reinforces the idea that gangs or *maras* is a topic mainly pertaining to men, in which women occasionally appear in roles as wives, girlfriends, or daughters of a male gang member. The exception occurs when the news article is exclusively about a female gang member. In such a case, the female gang member acquires the same characteristics as their male counterparts, such as the ability to generate fear, for example.

4.5 Conclusion

Analyses of popular news media outlets in both El Salvador and Honduras provide a clear story; media reporting is overwhelmingly focused on male gang members, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Notwithstanding, media coverage of women in gangs has increased in Honduras, whereby women are specifically mentioned when they form part of the captured gang members in news articles emanating from a police operation. In the case of El Salvador, female gang members remain more anonymous. Moreover, in the case of Honduras, when attention goes to female gang members, it is with more sensation and indignation, while in the case of El Salvador, the focus lies on her position as a girlfriend, wife, or daughter of a male gang member. While men are the protagonists in news articles on “perpetrators” of gang crime and violence, in articles regarding “victims” the focus is the other way around. In these cases, more attention is given to female victims but likewise with a sensationalist perspective and indignation: *The tears are of blood, nobody can explain how the evilness of a person can reach the degree of dismembering the body of a lady, of a woman, that could well be his mother or his sister* (Heraldo, 2018e).

In answer to our research question, we conclude that the media coverage of women in Central American gangs indeed propagates a rather paternalistic and distorted image. By centralizing media coverage regarding gangs on men (whether women are involved or not), women are made invisible. This implies that the vision of the gang problem is referred to as a problem of men, despite the fact that other journalistic reports, as well as studies conducted by academics or international NGOs, have tried to portray and discuss a more nuanced position and role of women

in gangs. Also, our own experience in the field has shown that the role of women in gangs in El Salvador and Honduras is much more significant (quantitatively and qualitatively) than the patriarchal image that is portrayed by current media coverage. Hence, more academic research on the topic is necessary to counteract this superficial and erroneous image of women and gangs.

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Chapter 5

The Role of Online Communication Among Gang and Non-gang Youth



Timothy McCuddy and Finn-Aage Esbensen

5.1 Introduction

Youth gangs have posed a topic of criminological interest for the better part of a century, and during that time one of the underlying characteristics attributed to these youth collectives has been their street or public space orientation. These youth groups have been of interest because of their involvement in delinquent activity but also because of their intimidation of community members. They congregated on street corners (e.g., Whyte, 1943), on sidewalks in front of local businesses, or in other clearly visible locations. While much of their activity involved merely hanging out (e.g., Thrasher, 1927/1963), the public social interaction among these youth was a distinguishing feature of the groups. This public nature of youth gangs has been a constant and defining characteristic of the groups, so much so that in 2002, following years of debate, the Eurogang Program of Research proposed the following consensus definition that is now widely utilized in gang research: “A street gang is any *durable, street-oriented* youth group whose involvement in *illegal activity* is part of its *group identity*” (Esbensen & Maxson, 2012:3).

In the ensuing years, however, society has experienced a global shift in communication and social interaction. With the advent of the Internet and development of subsequent social media platforms, social interaction has undergone a seismic shift. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms allow for intimate social interaction from the confines of one’s own private space, meaning social interaction no longer has to take place face to face. On the one hand, this extends

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social processes among friends within one's neighborhood since online communication can occur more frequently over longer periods of time compared to face-to-face communication. On the other hand, cyberspace is also a context that enables one to connect with spatially distant peers who reside in different neighborhoods, or even the same neighborhood, with in-person encounters that are brief or nonexistent (Aiken, 2016; Lane, 2019; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010). The current study focuses on this second group by considering how online-only peers provide influence that extends beyond the street. It aims to uncover the extent to which technological changes have broadly affected adolescent interaction and specifically examines the role of face-to-face versus online communication in delinquent behavior of gang and non-gang youth.

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 *Street Orientation of Gangs*

A brief review of definitions of street or youth gangs highlights the enduring aspect of street orientation. Extending back to the pioneering work of Thrasher, definitions of youth gangs have implicitly, if not explicitly, included a public domain component. Thrasher, for instance, stated that gangs represented “an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting **face to face**, milling, **movement, through space as a unit**, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local **territory**” (Thrasher 1927/1963:46 – emphasis added). One can question whether street orientation is explicitly or implicitly identified in this definition, but it is clearly the case that, according to Thrasher, gangs exist in public spaces and interact as a group in these public spaces.

Decades later, Klein offered his definition of juvenile gangs as “any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their **neighborhood**, b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement” (Klein, 1971:13 – emphasis added). Klein's emphasis on the recognition of the group by neighborhood residents as well as by group members highlights the public aspect of these gangs.

Miller offered another widely cited definition of gangs: “A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular **territory**, facility, or type of

enterprise” (Miller, 1980:121 – emphasis added). While Miller emphasized the organizational and structural components of gangs, he nonetheless included the notion of territory – an explicit acknowledgement that these groups exist in the public domain.

As evidenced by these three examples, definitions of gangs have been the subject of considerable scholarly debate over the past 100 years with different scholars emphasizing various elements of the group. Differences of opinion exist with regard to the extent to which gangs are organized, whether illegal activity is a necessary prerequisite for groups to be classified as gangs, whether the groups have names, or claim territory. As the three definitional examples highlight, however, there has been little disagreement regarding the public nature of youth gangs.

Has the advent of social media altered the need for gangs to exist in the public domain (generally defined as public space such as street corner) or is cyberspace simply an extension of public space into a new realm? While we cannot address this question unequivocally, we can examine the extent to which gang members are active in cyberspace (e.g., social media), whether gang members are differentially involved in social media, and if social media affects gang member behavior.

5.2.2 *Peer Influence*

An additional aspect of gangs that has long been uncontested is peer influence. Gang members are influenced by the gang as a whole as well as other gang members via group interaction and group processes. When non-gang members join a gang, their behavior (and attitudes) begins to mirror the behavior and attitudes of other gang members. That is, new gang members express more antisocial attitudes and engage in more delinquent behavior than non-gang youth (e.g., Battin, Hill, Abbot, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Melde & Esbensen, 2011, 2013, 2014; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Tobin, & Smith, 2003).

The influence of “delinquent peers” is unchallenged, and several researchers have examined the extent to which gang affiliation exacerbates the effect of delinquent peers (Battin et al., 1998; Carson, Wiley, & Esbensen, 2017; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993). Carson and colleagues summarized their findings in the following manner: “Even when controlling for high levels of delinquent peers, gang youth differ from their nongang counterparts on a variety of attitudinal and behavioral measures.” A small but growing body of research lends support to the notion that gangs are qualitatively different from delinquent groups and not just extremely delinquent peer groups. While much of the prior research has examined gang/non-gang differences, some researchers have controlled for other delinquent groups not classified as gangs (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Battin et al., 1998; Carson et al., 2017; Dong & Krohn, 2016; Esbensen et al., 1993; Gatti et al., 2005; Gordon et al., 2004; Thornberry et al., 2003). The “gang” effect persists, suggesting there is something

qualitatively different about the gang environment responsible for higher levels of delinquency (Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013; Esbensen & Maxson, 2012; Klein, 1997; Klein & Crawford, 1967; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Moore, 1991; Short Jr. & Strodbeck, 1965). Carson et al. (2017) suggest that these “qualitative differences” are largely attributed to group processes acting within the gang, which can create an environment conducive to delinquency and violence. To date, identifying these unique group processes has been a challenge to researchers and remains somewhat of a black box (for an insightful examination of group processes, consult Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012).

5.2.3 *Online Influence*

Social media has expanded the potential influence of peers, which raises several questions. Are there friends with whom youth only interact online? Has social media simply expanded the time that in-person friends can interact by also interacting online? Are there differences in the types of information youth share online? The influence of social media poses a new frontier for examining the role and influence of peers.

The widespread adoption of cell phones and more recently smartphones has not excluded gang-involved youth. Scholars largely contend that cyberspace extends social processes that take place in the street; for example, the digital context can generate new conflict or intensify existing tension between rival groups (Lane, 2019; Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2017; Patton, Pyrooz, Decker, Frey, & Leonard, 2019; Stevens, Gilliard-Matthews, Dunaev, Woods, & Brawner, 2017). However, it is not clear whether this context simply mirrors the street or introduces unique qualities (Stuart 2020). Despite claims made by the National Gang Intelligence Center (2011) that gangs use social media for recruitment, most empirical work fails to support this claim (e.g., Décary-Héту & Morselli, 2011; King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Patton et al., 2014). Rather, the bulk of extant research suggests that the Internet is primarily used for self-promotion and general communication (Peterson & Densley, 2017; Pyrooz, Decker, & Moule Jr., 2013), with some suggesting the diffusion of gang culture is the most significant contribution of the Internet (Moule Jr, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2014). Pyrooz et al. (2013) liken the Internet to a virtual graffiti wall where members can use images and videos to promote their gang and show off exploits that can gain them notoriety among rivals. Almost three-quarters of gang members in their sample explicitly stated the Internet is used to gain respect. Given that gangs primarily use the Internet to further symbolic needs, Patton, Eschmann, and Butler (2013) coined the term “Internet banging” or “cyberbanging” to explain how the cyber context promotes gang affiliation, enables the reporting of violent acts in order to gain notoriety, and facilitates the sharing of information with other gangs. However, Stuart (2020) argues that despite the use of social media by gang-involved youth, a majority of online conflicts do not lead to offline violence

since this medium allows innovative ways to avoid conflict (e.g., defend and repair reputations, invalidate rival's performances).

While it is clear that gang-involved youth do not shy away from the public sphere of the Internet, there is evidence that gang members have an affinity for technology that surpasses non-gang involved youth. For example, Moule et al. (Moule Jr, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013) found that gang members spend more time using the Internet than non-gang members, and the National Assessment Center (2007) found that 70% of gang members report it is easier to make friends online rather than on the streets. Sela-Shayovitz (2012) also found that compared to the general adolescent population, Israeli gang members spend more time socializing online and this has become an alternative to hanging out in the streets. In the early days of social media, there was unequal access to technology which widened the digital divide among those who live in disadvantaged areas. However, as of 2018, 95% of youth in the United States report having access to a smartphone, including 93% of those who live in households that make less than \$30,000 per year and 94% of those whose parents' have a high school education or less (Pew Research Center, 2018). Smartphones have narrowed the digital divide which has enabled those previously excluded from technology (e.g., gang-involved youth) to fully interact with the cyber context (Mossberger, Kaplan, & Gilbert, 2008; Pyrooz et al., 2013).

Given that gang-involved youth are active online, special attention should be given to how online disinhibition operates among this sample of youth. In his book *The Digital Street*, Lane (2019) discusses how the code of the street has been transmitted and extended through online communication. In particular, he discusses how the publicity and respect garnered from disclosing participation in street violence on social media outweighs any perceived legal or violent consequences associated with sharing this information. In Patton et al. (2017) analyses of gang members' social media, they highlight how youth can act tough online without immediate concern for their safety, potentially exacerbating tension between groups which can later lead to violence in the streets. While the notion of online disinhibition has been widely researched by psychologists (e.g. Aiken, 2016; Suler, 2004, 2016), criminologists are only beginning to understand why youth will disclose involvement in illegal activities or act more aggressive when using electronic devices (e.g., see McCuddy, 2018). This has important implications for studying gangs given that gang members are more likely to engage in violence as a response to being disrespected online, especially when this disrespect is targeted at the group (Moule et al., 2017). In fact, in analyzing gang indictments in Harlem from 2011 to 2014, Lane, Ramirez, and Pearce (2018) found that almost half of all the evidence was obtained via social media. Whether it is explicit acknowledgment of crimes or simply threatening others, youth often act differently online and say things that might be different from information disclosed through face-to-face interaction.

In order to expand our insights about peer group processes within gangs, this chapter examines the extent to which online peers have supplemented the influence of in-person peers, specifically with respect to illegal activity. Emerging research in criminology has found some evidence of an online peer effect, yet most of this research is cross-sectional. Among the few investigations into this general arena,

McCuddy and Vogel (2015) found that online messages promoting criminal behavior were associated with self-reported offending among college students, and this association is not confounded with peer delinquency when considering a middle school sample (McCuddy, 2018; see also Huang et al., 2014; Miller and Morris, 2016). Although most inquiries examine online peers as a whole or focus specifically on in-person friends who use social media, the goal of the current chapter is to look at the unique effect of online peers – those friends who are not regularly seen in person. That is, it aims to look at the cyber context as an additional source of peer relations with an influence that extends beyond the street, and how this influence affects behaviors among gang and non-gang youth.

5.3 Current Study

We organize our analyses into two sections: The first section provides a descriptive account of the extent to which gang members use social media compared with other non-gang youth and the second section then examines the extent to which interactions with online peers influence delinquent behaviors of gang and non-gang youth. In the first section, we address the following questions: (1) To what extent do gang members utilize social media to interact with others? (2) Do gang members find it easier to make friends online? (3) How many of their in-person or face-to-face friends are also online friends? (4) Do gang youth prefer to communicate online with their friends? (5) And, how many of their friends have posted about illegal things online? Following these descriptive analyses we investigate the primary focus of this chapter – do online peers matter? That is, do online peers have a unique and/or additional influence on youth above and beyond the influence of in-person friends, and is there a difference in the role of online peers for gang versus non-gang youth? While some research has examined the influence of any online friends (e.g., Branley and Covey 2018; McCuddy & Vogel, 2015), we limit our efforts to the investigation of the influence of friends who are not regularly seen in person.

5.3.1 Research Design

The University of Missouri–St. Louis Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (UMSL CSSI) is part of the National Institute of Justice’s Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (<https://nij.gov/topics/crime/school-crime/pages/school-safety-initiative.aspx>). The project explores a number of issues related to school safety and the reduction of school-based violence; in this chapter, however, we focus our attention on online communication and the role of online peers relative to in-person peers. The UMSL CSSI project consists of a 3-year panel design involving two cohorts of students (a seventh and an eighth grade cohort); the current analyses utilize the first two waves of the larger research project.

5.3.2 *Site Selection*

St. Louis County is a highly diverse setting in terms of population demographics and socioeconomic status. To capitalize on this diversity in our examination of school violence and safety, we strategically contacted school districts with the goal of including schools in the region that would be considered high, moderate, and low risk based on a range of factors, including geographic location, school size, and percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. These efforts resulted in the participation of six districts that included 12 middle schools (three districts have one middle school each, one has two, another has three, and the last one has four) with a total of approximately 4700 seventh and eighth grade students. Five of the schools are categorized as high risk (more than 80% of students are on free and reduced-price lunch); four schools are considered moderate risk (between 41% and 80% of students on free or reduced-price lunch); and three schools are classified as low risk (less than 41% of students on free or reduced-price lunch).

5.3.3 *Active Parental Consent*

One challenge in conducting school-based research is obtaining active parental consent for student participation. All six districts approved our strategy of recruiting classroom teachers to collect the consent forms for the project. This process included compensating teachers \$2.00 for each consent form that was returned by students in their classes. Teachers also received incentives linked to classroom return rates (i.e., \$10 for 70%; \$20 for 80%, \$30 for 90%, and \$40 if all students in a class returned a signed form). There were a total of 4719 students enrolled in seventh and eighth grades in the 12 schools; of these students, 3663 (77.6%) returned positive parental permission forms while 165 (3.5%) parents refused; an additional 891 (18.9%) students failed to return a signed form. The important role of teachers in this process is witnessed by the fact that consent rates varied significantly by classroom (from 31% to 100%), between schools (62% to 89%), and across school districts (ranging from 70% active parental consent in one district to 84% in another).

5.3.4 *Data and Sample Description*

The 3663 students with parental consent were eligible to participate in the research: 3640 (99.4%) assented and completed the initial online survey through Qualtrics™ and 3165 (86.4%) completed the Wave 2 survey. These high completion rates were possible due to the support of the school principals who were accommodating and allowed research team members to return multiple times in efforts to survey students who had been absent during the initial visit. The active consent and completion rates allow us to have considerable confidence in the representativeness of our results.

We turn now to a description of our data and measures. Demographic data include biological sex (0 = female, 1 = male), race (black, white, and other), age (1 = 12 years old and younger, 2 = 13 years old, 3 = 14 years and older), and family living situation (single parent = 1, else = 0). Our key variable, gang membership, is measured using two separate techniques. First, we rely on self-nomination, a method with a long history of use and with established validity (Esbensen, Winfree Jr., He, & Taylor, 2001). Toward the end of the survey and following a number of self-reported delinquency items, students were asked “Have you ever been a gang member?” and “Are you now in a gang?” A total of 124 youth claimed gang affiliation at Wave 1. An alternative method, used by Melde and Esbensen (2011, 2013, and 2014) asks respondents “Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?” This question follows a series of other questions about the individual’s peer group. At Wave 1, 279 youth reported that their group of friends was a gang. We combine responses to these two questions for a gang sample of 314 youth who met one or both criteria (89 youth met both criteria).

A large body of research has examined risk factors associated with gang membership. These risk factors are generally grouped into five domains: neighborhood, school, family, peer group, and individual. In this examination we include one or more indicators from each domain and we also introduce risk factors that may be unique to the influence of online activity. For instance, we include measures of online parental monitoring and exposure to online peers who espouse delinquent attitudes. Additionally, we include measures of online activity and preferences for online versus in-person interaction. In the following section we provide brief descriptions of the measures used in our analyses. For a full listing of measures, consult Appendix A.

One risk factor from the *community* domain consists of a five-item scale that measures neighborhood disorder. The *school* domain is captured by a similar five-item scale that assesses school disorder. From the *family* risk factor domain, in addition to family structure described above, we include parental monitoring which consists of a three-item Likert scale (e.g., my parents know who I am with if I am not at home).

We include two *individual*-level risk factors: anger/temper consists of three items (e.g., I lose my temper pretty easily) and hitting neutralizations consists of four items (e.g., It’s okay to beat up someone if they talk badly about you behind your back). From the *peer* domain, we include three measures: prosocial peers (e.g., Got along well with teachers and adults at school); delinquent peers (e.g., How many of your current friends have done the following? Stolen something worth less than \$50); and violent peers (e.g., How many have your friends have hit someone with the idea of hurting him/her?).

In addition to these traditional risk factors included in gang research, we include several risk factors that emphasize the online environment. From the family domain, we include a single-item measure of *online parental monitoring* (My parents know what I am doing when I am using electronic devices). From the individual domain we include questions that tap *attitudes about online communication* (e.g., Going online has made it easier to make friends). Given our primary interest of examining

the extent to which online friends impact behavior above and beyond the role of in-person friends, we include additional measures from the peer domain. To capture the *influence of online peers*, we ask a series of questions that follow this introduction: “Some people have online friends – these can be friends that they have met in person or through online activities such as social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.)” The respondents are then asked the following specific questions: “How many of your in-person friends are also online friends?” (Response categories include 1. none of them, 2. few of them, 3. half of them, 4. most of them, 5. all of them) and “How many of your online friends have you never met in person?” To assess the effect of having friends they only interact with online, only those youths who reported having online-only friends answered five questions assessing if the friends’ expressed support for (1) stealing something worth less than \$50; (2) attacking someone with a weapon; (3) using tobacco or alcohol products; (4) using marijuana or other illegal drugs; and (5) hitting someone with the idea of hurting him/her.

Our primary dependent variable is self-reported delinquency which consists of a 13-item variety measure based on Wave 2 responses (Sweeten, 2012). While respondents could indicate the number of times they had committed a particular act, we coded all responses as “yes” or “no” and then summed the 13 items. In addition to the global measure, we also include a binary measure for violence indicating if a respondent had committed any of five violent acts (e.g., hit someone with the idea of hurting him/her, attack someone with a weapon).

Table 5.1 provides an overview of the sample disaggregated by gang and non-gang status. Both groups consist of slightly more females (54% of non-gang and 57% of gang members) than males. The sample is diverse in terms of race/ethnicity with virtually equal representation of white (42%), black (38%), and another race/ethnicity (20%) in the non-gang group, but black youth are disproportionately over-represented (63%) while white youth (18%) are underrepresented in the gang sample. About one-fourth of the non-gang sample resides in single-parent households while slightly greater number of gang youth (33%) live in single-parent settings. The gang youth are slightly older (13.28 years) than the non-gang youth (13.14 years). (Recall that for analysis purposes, age was recoded into three categories; in this metric, $13.28 = 2.26$ and $13.14 = 2.10$.)

5.3.5 Analytic Strategy

The analyses begin by first examining bivariate differences between gang and non-gang youth across various risk factors. In order to answer our first set of questions, attention is directed toward how these groups differ across the online communication variables. Finally, a series of negative binomial and logistic regressions examine the extent to which offline and online peers are associated with self-reported delinquency and violence. Given the structure of the student questionnaire, five questions sought respondents’ assessment of the extent to which their online-only

Table 5.1 Descriptive statistics

	Full sample (N = 2844)		Restricted sample (N = 1864)	
	Non-gang (n = 2625)	Gang (n = 219)	Non-gang (n = 1694)	Gang (n = 170)
	%/mean	%/mean	%/mean	%/mean
<i>Demographics</i>				
Male	46%	43%	49%	44%
White	42%	18%	38%	18%
Black	38%	64%	42%	63%
Other race	19%	18%	20%	19%
Single-parent household	23%	30%	25%	33%
Age	2.10	2.26	2.11	2.24
<i>Traditional risk factors</i>				
<i>Community</i>				
Neighborhood disorder	1.50	1.86	1.53	1.87
<i>School</i>				
School disorder	1.68	1.90	1.70	1.91
<i>Family</i>				
Offline parental monitoring	4.48	4.11	4.44	4.06
<i>Peer</i>				
Prosocial peers	3.66	3.08	3.61	3.16
Delinquent peers	48%	78%	52%	77%
Violent peers	37%	63%	40%	62%
<i>Individual</i>				
Temper	2.82	3.69	2.88	3.64
Hitting neutralization	3.03	3.94	3.10	3.90
<i>Online risk factors</i>				
<i>Family</i>				
Online parental monitoring	3.19	2.74	3.15	2.79
<i>Individual</i>				
Prefer online communication	11%	16%	13%	19%
Easier to make friends online	23%	32%	29%	35%
Personal delinquency disclosure	9%	14%	10%	16%
<i>Peer</i>				
Most/all face-to-face friends are online	56%	64%	57%	64%
Most/all online friends never met	15%	21%	18%	20%
Peer delinquency disclosure	22%	52%	25%	55%
Delinquent peer influence	40%	67%	40%	67%
Violent peer influence	28%	54%	27%	52%
<i>Self-reported delinquency</i>				
General delinquency	0.97	2.53	1.07	2.64
Violence	20%	41%	22%	39%

friends express support for five forms of delinquent behavior. To capture the unique influence of online-only friends – that is, people the study participants did not regularly see in person – only those youth indicating that they had exclusively online friends answered these questions. Respondents who did not have exclusively online friends were funneled out of this section of the questionnaire and thus were not included in the multivariate analyses. Due to this sampling strategy, two samples were used to address the research questions: The bivariate analyses use the full sample to compare gang and non-gang youth while the multivariate analyses exclude those youths who do not have online-only friends. Table 5.1 provides descriptive statistics for the full and restricted samples; there are no substantive differences between the two samples.

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Risk Factors

Consistent with prior gang research (e.g., Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2010; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003), all of the risk factors included in this study distinguish gang from non-gang youth. In each comparison between samples, risk is significantly higher among the gang youth. Gang members report more disorder in their schools and neighborhoods. They also report less parental monitoring (both offline and online) and have fewer prosocial peers. Gang members also hold more antisocial attitudes (e.g., more acceptance of physical violence) than non-gang youth.

5.4.2 Online Communication

To what extent are gang and non-gang youth similar in their use of online communication? Based on our bivariate analyses, it appears that gang-involved youth are more involved in the online environment than are their non-gang peers. Study participants were asked to agree or disagree with statements related to online activity. We collapsed “agree” and “strongly agree” responses to compare gang and non-gang youths’ support for the statements. While a minority of both groups agreed that they preferred communicating with friends online rather than in person, slightly more gang youth agreed (16% compared to 11% in the full sample). Similarly, 32% of gang youth (compared to 23% of non-gang youth) indicate that it is easier for them to make friends online than in person. Two-thirds of the gang youth indicate that most or all of their in-person friends are also friends online, whereas slightly more than half (56%) of non-gang youth report substantial overlap between online and offline friends.

Gang youth appear to be more willing than non-gang youth to have exclusively online friends with 21% compared with 15% of non-gang youth; that is, they are more likely to have friends online that they have never met in person. Online postings about illegal activity also appear more common among gang members. More than half of the gang members (52% in full sample) indicated that they first learned about their friends' illegal activities online rather than in person (compared to 22% of non-gang youth). With respect to discussing their own illegal activities, the majority of youth indicate they would generally do it in person. However, more gang members (14%) indicated that they would primarily discuss it online compared with non-gang youth (9%).

5.4.3 *The Effect of Offline and Online Peers*

The differences in utilization of online communication among gang and non-gang youth raises questions concerning how online peers affect offending behaviors among these two groups. In the following tables, we detail five models that assess the extent to which offline and online peers influence general delinquency for non-gang (Table 5.2) and gang youth (Table 5.3). Tables 5.4 and 5.5 report the same information but for violent offenses. Recall that within these models, online peers refer to those individuals who are not regularly seen in person, thus representing a distinct peer group that does not include face-to-face friends. Model 1 provides a baseline assessment excluding both peer measures and T1 delinquency. Model 2 includes offline peer delinquency while Model 3 presents the unique effect from the influence of online peers. Model 4 reports results including both offline and online peer measures and Model 5 adds a measure of prior offending, which is used to capture other unmeasured factors related to delinquency and violence. This final model represents a more conservative test of peer effects since it removes any variance shared with the dependent variables. Given that general delinquency is measured as a count of different delinquent acts, these models use a negative binomial regression where coefficients are interpreted by calculating the incident rate ratio, derived from the exponential transformation of the coefficients. Since violence is a binary measure differentiating between those who did and did not engage in violence, logistic regression is used and results are interpreted using predicted probabilities, which are calculated by dividing the odds ratio by $1 + \text{the odds ratio}$ ($e^{\beta}/1 + e^{\beta}$).

Table 5.2 focuses specifically on general delinquency among non-gang members. In the initial model, those who are black and those with higher levels of neighborhood disorder, temper, and hitting neutralizations report higher levels (i.e., counts) of delinquency, and those with higher levels of prosocial peers and offline and online parental monitoring experience lower levels of delinquency. When looking at the individual effect of each peer item, having delinquent peers is associated with a 70% increase ($(e^{0.53} - 1) \times 100$) in the expected count of different delinquent acts (Model 2), whereas the influence from online peers is associated with a 60%

Table 5.2 Negative binomial regression of self-reported delinquency on peer delinquency and online peer support for delinquency among non-gang members ($n = 1694$)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		
	b	SE	B	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	
Demographics											
Male	-0.03	0.08	-0.03	0.08	-0.01	0.08	-0.01	0.08	-0.03	0.08	
Black	0.22	0.10	*	0.24	0.10	*	0.22	0.10	*	0.22	0.09
Other race	0.12	0.11		0.12	0.11		0.11	0.11		0.12	0.11
Single parent	-0.02	0.09		-0.02	0.09		-0.01	0.09		-0.01	0.08
Age	-0.08	0.05		-0.09	0.05		-0.10	0.05	†	-0.10	0.05
Traditional risk factors											
Neighborhood disorder	0.23	0.09	*	0.22	0.09	*	0.23	0.09	*	0.22	0.09
School disorder	-0.10	0.11		-0.13	0.11		-0.13	0.11		-0.14	0.11
Offline parental monitoring	-0.16	0.06	*	-0.12	0.06	*	-0.14	0.06	*	-0.12	0.06
Prosocial peers	-0.22	0.05	***	-0.18	0.05	***	-0.19	0.05	***	-0.17	0.05
Delinquent peers	---	---		0.53	0.08	***	---	---		0.39	0.09
Temper	0.17	0.04	***	0.12	0.04	**	0.14	0.04	**	0.12	0.04
Hitting neutralization	0.24	0.04	***	0.19	0.04	***	0.20	0.04	***	0.18	0.04
Online risk factors											
Online parental monitoring	-0.09	0.04	*	-0.06	0.04	†	-0.06	0.04	†	-0.05	0.04
Peer influence	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.47	0.08	***	0.30	0.09
Delinquency T1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Intercept	0.39	0.40		0.06	0.40		0.16	0.40		-0.01	0.40
Log likelihood	-2285.71			-2265.92***			-2268.95***			-2260.25***	
$\chi^2(df)$	---			39.58 (1)			33.52 (1)			50.92 (2)	
											74.42 (1)

Abbreviations: SE standard error

Notes: Estimated using robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5.3 Negative binomial regression of self-reported delinquency on peer delinquency and online peer support for delinquency among gang members ($n = 170$)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Demographics										
Male	0.07	0.19	0.01	0.18	0.06	0.18	0.01	0.18	-0.30	0.19
Black	0.11	0.27	-0.02	0.27	0.09	0.27	-0.01	0.27	0.06	0.26
Other race	0.56	0.31	†	0.30	0.47	0.31	0.46	0.30	0.72	0.29 *
Single parent	-0.02	0.19	0.04	0.19	-0.01	0.19	0.03	0.19	-0.03	0.18
Age	-0.09	0.13	-0.08	0.13	-0.13	0.13	-0.10	0.13	-0.08	0.12
Traditional risk factors										
Neighborhood disorder	-0.02	0.20	-0.02	0.19	-0.08	0.19	-0.06	0.19	-0.02	0.18
School disorder	0.53	0.22	*	0.22	0.61	0.22	**	0.22	0.51	0.21 *
Offline parental monitoring	-0.09	0.09	-0.07	0.09	-0.07	0.09	-0.07	0.09	0.05	0.09
Prosocial peers	-0.13	0.10	-0.13	0.10	-0.08	0.10	-0.10	0.10	-0.06	0.10
Delinquent peers	---	---	0.99	0.26	---	---	0.80	0.29	**	0.28 *
Temper	0.14	0.10	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.10	0.09	0.09	0.01	0.09
Hitting neutralization	0.20	0.11	†	0.11	0.19	0.11	†	0.11	0.01	0.11
Online risk factors										
Online parental monitoring	-0.04	0.07	-0.07	0.07	-0.02	0.07	-0.05	0.07	-0.09	0.07
Peer influence	---	---	---	---	0.66	0.22	**	0.25	-0.04	0.25
Delinquency T1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.16	0.04
Intercept	-0.51	0.89	-0.72	0.86	-0.96	0.87	-0.90	0.86	-0.88	0.80
Log likelihood	-345.47		-338.13***		-341.15**		-337.33***		-327.76***	
$\chi^2(df)$	---		14.68 (1)		8.64 (1)		16.28 (2)		19.14 (1)	

Abbreviations: SE standard error

Notes: Estimated using robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5.4 Logistic regression of self-reported violence on peer violence and online peer support for violence among non-gang members ($n = 1694$)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5						
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE					
Demographics															
Male	1.14	0.15	1.16	0.15	1.17	0.15	1.17	0.15	1.18	0.16					
Black	1.09	0.17	1.06	0.17	1.06	0.17	1.05	0.17	1.08	0.18					
Other race	1.11	0.20	1.09	0.20	1.09	0.20	1.08	0.20	1.07	0.20					
Single parent	0.98	0.14	1.00	0.15	1.01	0.14	1.01	0.15	1.01	0.15					
Age	0.90	0.08	0.90	0.08	0.89	0.08	0.90	0.08	0.89	0.08					
Traditional risk factors															
Neighborhood disorder	1.51	0.23	**	1.42	0.22	*	1.47	0.22	*	1.41	0.22	*	1.37	0.21	*
School disorder	0.73	0.13	†	0.76	0.14		0.71	0.12	†	0.75	0.13		0.75	0.14	
Offline parental monitoring	0.86	0.09		0.87	0.09		0.89	0.09		0.88	0.09		0.90	0.09	
Prosocial peers	0.81	0.06	**	0.86	0.07	†	0.83	0.07	*	0.86	0.07	†	0.85	0.07	†
Delinquent peers	---	---	---	2.58	0.34	***	---	---	---	2.40	0.36	***	2.03	0.32	***
Temper	1.41	0.09	***	1.31	0.09	***	1.38	0.09	***	1.31	0.09	***	1.22	0.08	**
Hitting neutralization	1.39	0.10	***	1.30	0.10	***	1.34	0.10	***	1.29	0.10	**	1.21	0.09	*
Online risk factors															
Online parental monitoring	0.96	0.05		0.99	0.06		0.97	0.06		0.99	0.06		1.00	0.06	
Peer influence	---	---	---	---	---	---	1.78	0.24	***	1.17	0.18		1.01	0.16	
Delinquency T1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2.71	0.39	***
Intercept	0.16	0.10	**	0.11	0.07	**	0.14	0.09	**	0.11	0.07	**	0.13	0.09	**
Log likelihood	-822.33			-796.78***			-813.16***			-796.25***			-772.74***		
$\chi^2(df)$	---			51.1 (1)			18.34 (1)			52.16 (2)			47.02 (1)		

Abbreviations: OR odds ratio, SE standard error

Notes: Estimated using robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5.5 Logistic regression of self-reported violence on peer violence and online peer support for violence among gang members (*n* = 170)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	OR	SE		OR	SE		OR	SE		OR	SE		OR	SE	
Demographics															
Male	0.62	0.25		0.55	0.23		0.56	0.23		0.52	0.22		0.51	0.22	
Black	0.91	0.52		0.67	0.40		0.69	0.41		0.61	0.36		0.61	0.38	
Other race	3.49	2.26	†	3.03	2.06		2.81	1.89		2.77	1.90		2.60	1.82	
Single parent	0.63	0.26		0.64	0.27		0.59	0.25		0.62	0.26		0.65	0.28	
Age	0.71	0.20		0.72	0.21		0.71	0.20		0.72	0.21		0.77	0.23	
Traditional risk factors															
Neighborhood disorder	0.87	0.36		0.92	0.39		0.88	0.38		0.92	0.40		1.00	0.44	
School disorder	2.67	1.32	*	3.06	1.56	*	2.61	1.32	†	2.93	1.50	*	3.24	1.71	*
Offline parental monitoring	1.00	0.20		1.07	0.22		1.11	0.24		1.11	0.24		1.25	0.27	
Prosocial peers	0.70	0.15		0.71	0.16		0.75	0.17		0.74	0.17		0.78	0.19	
Delinquent peers	---	---		3.79	1.72	**	---	---		2.83	1.48	*	2.70	1.45	†
Temper	1.79	0.39	**	1.70	0.38	*	1.68	0.38	*	1.67	0.38	*	1.54	0.36	†
Hitting neutralization	1.23	0.30		1.03	0.26		1.16	0.29		1.04	0.27		0.91	0.25	
Online risk factors															
Online parental monitoring	0.80	0.12		0.81	0.13		0.77	0.12	†	0.78	0.12		0.73	0.12	†
Peer influence	---	---		---	---		2.82	1.17	*	1.74	0.84		1.51	0.76	
Delinquency T1	---	---		---	---		---	---		---	---		3.49	1.65	**
Intercept	0.10	0.18		0.06	0.11		0.07	0.13		0.06	0.10		0.03	0.05	†
Log likelihood	-90.43			-85.83**			-87.21*			-85.18**			-81.51**		
$\chi^2(df)$	---			9.2 (1)			6.44 (1)			10.5 (2)			7.34 (1)		

Abbreviations: *OR* odds ratio, *SE* standard error

Notes: Estimated using robust standard errors. † *p* < 0.10; * *p* < 0.05; ** *p* < 0.01; *** *p* < 0.001

increase (($e^{0.47} - 1$) × 100) (Model 3). In these models, online parental monitoring is only marginally significant, and age is now significant in Model 3. Both peer measures are significant when included in the same model (Model 4) although the effects are slightly attenuated – having delinquent peers increases the expected count of delinquent acts by 48% and the influence from online peers increases the expected count by 35%. However, in the more conservative model that controls for prior self-reported delinquency (Model 5), the influence from online peers is no longer significant. Here, having delinquent peers is associated with a 32% increase in the expected count of delinquent acts

Table 5.3 focuses exclusively on gang members and the peer effects initially appear much stronger. In the first model, only school disorder significantly predicts

delinquency, although other race and hitting neutralizations are marginally significant. When looking at the individual peer items, having delinquent peers is associated with a 169% increase in the expected count of delinquent acts (Model 2), whereas the influence from online peers increases the expected count of delinquent acts by 93% (Model 3). However, an important deviation appears in Model 4 - the effect of online peer influence is no longer significant when controlling for peer delinquency. This suggests that these measures are confounded and that the online peer effect is likely driven by exposure to online friends who are similar to offline friends. In this model, having delinquent peers is associated with a 123% increase in the expected count of delinquent acts. The same substantive results are found in Model 5, which includes prior self-reported delinquency. Here delinquent peers are associated with an 86% increase in the expected count of delinquent acts

Table 5.4 focuses on the association between the peer variables and self-reported violence among non-gang members. The initial model demonstrates that only school disorder and temper significantly predict violence. When looking at the individual effects of the peer items, the probability of violence given one has violent peers is 0.72 ($(e^{0.95} / (1 + e^{0.95}))$) (Model 2) whereas the probability of violence given exposure to online peer influence is 0.64 ($(e^{0.58} / (1 + e^{0.58}))$). When both peer variables are included in the same model (Model 4), the effect of online peers is no longer significant, suggesting online influence is secondary to the influence of offline friends. These findings hold when including prior self-reported violence, where the probability of violence is 0.67 among those with violent peers

Finally, Table 5.5 focuses on the association between the peer variables and violence but only among gang members. Results mirror the overall findings of the non-gang sample, but the peer items have stronger effects. Here, in the initial models focusing on the individual items, the probability of violence given one has violent peers is 0.79 ($(e^{1.33} / (1 + e^{1.33}))$) (Model 2) and the probability is 0.74 ($(e^{1.04} / (1 + e^{1.04}))$) (Model 3) among those with influence from online peers. The online measure is again not significant when controlling for violent peers (Models 4 and 5).

Overall these findings suggest that online peers do not have additional influence on gang youth above and beyond the influence of offline peers. While there initially appears to be online peer effects on self-reported delinquency and violence, these effects no longer remain when controlling for traditional measures of peer delinquency and violence.

5.5 Discussion

What do these findings tell us about the influence of online peers and the role of social media? Are gang youth more active online and in cyberspace than their non-gang peers? Has the Internet and the expansion of social media changed the underlying group dynamics of youth gangs? These questions guide the following discussion.

The bivariate findings suggest that gang members were more likely to favor online communication and find it easier to make friends online compared to non-gang members. They were also more likely than non-gang members to first find out about their friends' delinquency online rather than in person, and while the vast majority of youth were not more willing to disclose their own illegal activities online, slightly more gang than non-gang youth indicated a willingness to do so. Moreover, the gang youth were also more likely to receive online support for illegal activities from youth they rarely see in person. These results beg the question: Does the online context disproportionately influence gang members relative to non-gang members? If so, this challenges the reliance of street orientation as an essential element of gangs.

As it relates to the effect of online peers who are not regularly seen in person, the online context does not appear to affect gang youth the same way it influences non-gang youth. The unique online "peer effect" appears to be consistently confounded with peer delinquency among gang members, suggesting perhaps that gang youth are more likely than non-gang youth to be exposed to unique online peers who are similar to their face-to-face friends. While there is some evidence that online peers independently influence delinquency among non-gang youth, there is no evidence that this effect endures for gang youth once we control for traditional peer delinquency. Perhaps this could be attributed to gang youth expanding their networks by befriending other gang members online. Recent work by Lane (2019) suggests that youth will often form online friendships with youth who reside in the same or nearby neighborhood, even though an offline encounter may not have taken place. These youths may simply be extending their offline network using online tools, and thus the online context may simply be a reflection of offline processes.

Another possibility is that youth exaggerate their online behavior and gang members are especially attuned to this process. For example, gang members may post online content that depicts a violent persona in order to avoid being violent in the street (Lane, 2019; Stuart, 2020). If this online portrayal differs from how youth behave offline, it can lead to the dismissal of the identity created in cyberspace. In particular, gang members have found innovative ways to call out others who post misleading information (e.g., cross-referencing facts, calling bluffs, catching them lacking) (Stuart, 2020). Unfortunately, we are unsure how pervasive this is among youth and our data are unable to look at how gang members communicate with other gang members. As it relates to our findings, it could be that gang-involved youth are more dismissive of online peers in general given the ease in which identity can be manipulated within cyberspace. Thus, as a source of negative influence, it appears that the cyber context does not introduce new risk that is independent of offline influence.

One interesting finding emerged that warrants further inquiry: While most youth still prefer to discuss their own illegal actions in person rather than online, gang youth were more likely than non-gang youth to prefer discussing these activities through online communication. To be clear, this refers to online communication

with friends broadly, not just with the unique online peers as discussed in this study. Therefore, this finding also refers to face-to-face friends who use social media and electronic devices to communicate. Lane (2019) discusses a variety of ways that gang members use social media and how online communication can act as an extension of the street, meaning youth have to act tough and respond to indiscretions in a similar manner as if they were confronted in their own neighborhood. While adhering to the street code online has implications for offline violence, our findings suggest that negative influences may be transmitted another way – youth may receive delinquent reinforcement online that could supplement and extend offline influence. On the one hand, this could introduce new definitions favorable toward crime if one's friends are deterred from discussing involvement in illegal activities offline. On the other hand, the intensity, duration, and frequency of exposure to these definitions may increase online, thereby differentially reinforcing delinquent or deviant behavior. Future studies should therefore consider the various ways that online communication has altered socialization processes within gangs and broader peer groups found in traditional contexts, such as schools and neighborhoods. As a whole, although gang members seem to have a proclivity toward online communication, this does not appear to introduce additional negative influence derived from unique, online peers. Rather, the online context exposes adolescents to a similar risk factor found in the streets.

Comparing online to offline influence presents many challenges, and a few limitations in the current study should be highlighted. Perhaps most notably, peer delinquency is a perceptual measure capturing behaviors of friends, whereas influence from online peers is a perceptual measure capturing attitudes and/or behaviors. These items are not directly comparable and potentially capture different elements of peer influence. Given the focus on online-only peers, this study omits the influence of in-person friends who communicate online, meaning it likely underestimates the influence that cyberspace has on self-reported delinquency. These issues should be addressed in future work, but the comparative nature of the current study means these limitations apply to both gang and non-gang youth. Findings should also be replicated with an older sample, as the average age of respondents during the first wave was between 13 and 14 years old. Youth may change their communication preferences as they age, and future work should examine influence among older adolescents.

Our overarching objective in this chapter was to address the extent to which the Internet, and cyberspace more generally, has affected social interaction of gang members. Our descriptive analyses as well as the multivariate analyses suggest that cyberspace provides youth, both gang and non-gang, with an extension of offline experiences. Based on the results reported here, we suggest that “cyberspace” be considered as an extension of “street orientation” and not as a unique environment.

Measures

School Disorder ($\alpha = 0.79$)

Kids bullying or teasing other children at your school
 Students beating up or threatening other students at your school
 Kids of different racial or cultural groups at your school not getting along with each other
 Students bringing guns to school
 Having things stolen at school
 Gangs in your school

Neighborhood Disorder ($\alpha = 0.84$)

Run-down or poorly kept buildings in your neighborhood
 Groups of people hanging out in public places causing trouble in your neighborhood
 Hearing gunshots in your neighborhood
 Cars traveling too fast throughout the streets of your neighborhood
 Gangs in your neighborhood

Parental Monitoring ($\alpha = 0.73$)

My parents know where I am when I am not at home or at school.
 I know how to get in touch with my parents if they are not at home.
 My parents know who I am with if I am not at home.

Temper/Anger ($\alpha = 0.78$)

I lose my temper pretty easily.
 Often when I'm angry at people, I feel more like hurting them than talking to them about why I am angry.
 When I'm really angry, other people better stay away from me.

Hitting Neutralization ($\alpha = 0.86$)

It's okay to beat up someone if you have to stand up for or protect your rights.
 It's okay to beat up someone if they are threatening to hurt your friends or family.
 It's okay to beat up someone if they talk badly about you behind your back.

Prosocial Peers ($\alpha = 0.78$)

Have you gotten along well with teachers and adults at school?
 Have been thought of as good students?
 Have been generally honest and told the truth?

Peer Delinquency

During the last year, how many of your current friends have done the following?
 Stolen something worth less than \$50

- Attacked someone with a weapon (Violence)
- Used tobacco or alcohol products
- Used marijuana or other illegal drugs
- Hit someone with the idea of hurting them (Violence)

Self-Reported Delinquency

Have you ever done these things, and if yes, how many times in the past 6 months?

- Skipped classes without an excuse
- Lied about your age to get into some place or to buy something
- Avoided paying for things such as movies or bus/metro rides
- Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you
- Carried a hidden weapon for protection (Violence)
- Stolen or tried to steal something worth less than \$50
- Stolen or tried to steal something worth more than \$50
- Gone into or tried to go into a building to steal something
- Hit someone with the idea of hurting him//her (Violence)
- Attacked someone with a weapon (Violence)
- Used a weapon for force to get money or things from people (Violence)
- Been involved in gang fights (Violence)
- Sold marijuana or other illegal drugs

Online Variables

Online Communication

You prefer communicating with friends online rather than in person.
 Going online has made it easier to make friends.
 How many of these friends have posted about illegal activities online that you did not find out about in person?

Parental Monitoring Online

My parents know what I am doing when I am using electronic devices such as computers, tablets, and cellphones.

Online Peer Delinquency

If you have online friends that you do not regularly see in person, how many have expressed support for each of the following in the past year?

- Stealing something worth less than \$50
- Attacking someone with a weapon (Violence)
- Using tobacco or alcohol products
- Using marijuana or other illegal drugs
- Hitting someone with the idea of hurting him/her (Violence)

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Chapter 6

Examining the Physical Manifestation of Alt-Right Gangs: From Online Trolling to Street Fighting



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6.1 Introduction

For many, the reemergence of America's white power movement (WPM) can be linked to Charlottesville, Virginia. The Unite the Right Rally in 2017, highlighted by screaming white males with tiki torches, was the visual representation of the WPM as it emerged back out from the digital spaces that it had been festering in for the last 20 years (Lyons, 2018; McAuliffe, 2019). This rally, with the far-right messaging, and the violent clashes between Alt-Right groups and counter-protestors, shocked people across the globe (First Vigil, 2019; ProPublica, 2018a, b; VICE, 2017). The rally culminated with the death of Heather Heyer and marked the moment the WPM blipped back onto the radar of mainstream America. Despite Unite the Right Rally shocking many Americans, for those who actively monitor and study the far right, this protest was simply a more visible face to a movement that never disappeared in America (Belew, 2018; Crothers, 2019; Daniels, 2018; Futrell & Simi, 2017; Neiwert, 2017; Lyons, 2018). The growing number of individuals who are in groups that espouse these new Alt-Right classifications have left policymakers, law enforcement, and the overall public confounded about why these "white" youth would join these groups, but also how to deal with them (see Reitman, 2018). As we will explain later in this chapter, we regard these groups as Alt-Right

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© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020

C. Melde, F. Weerman (eds.), *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47214-6_6

gangs with many similarities to the street gangs that have been studied in most gang literature.

The Alt-Right is regarded as the most current iteration of the WPM (Futrell & Simi, 2017; Mudde, 2018). The Internet has been vital for facilitating its evolution and growth (Crothers, 2019; Daniels, 2009; Finn, 2019; Stern, 2019). The ubiquity of digital communications and social media has been a catalyst allowing the WPM to undergo a noticeable transformation in the last four decades (Belew, 2018; Daniels, 2018; Futrell & Simi, 2017; Levin, 2002; Makuch & Lamoureux, 2018, 2019). Using the blueprint of “leaderless resistance” laid out by Louis Beam (1992), digital communications (e.g., online message boards) have been used to spread white power messages, maintain communication between individuals, and recruit new members with minimal resources (see Belew, 2018; Gardell, 2018; Joosse, 2017; Kaplan, 1997; Levin, 2002; Michael, 2012; Morris, 2017; Simpson & Druxes, 2015). “Leaderless resistance” pushed for the abandonment of large white power organizations (e.g., Aryan Nations, National Alliance, Hammerskins, etc.) in favor of smaller groups that are better able to evade and weather law enforcement intrusion. Throughout this transformation, the WPM continues to reinvent their groups’ images and branding to offset the stigma associated with white supremacy’s racial and anti-Semitic hate (Futrell & Simi, 2017; Hawley, 2019). Due to the role of the Internet in the creation and maintenance of Alt-Right gangs, current studies of street-level behavior need to consider the impact of online activity on real-world behavior.

This chapter provides a necessary first step to better understand the online activity patterns of Alt-Right gang members, and how this virtual behavior is converted into real-world action, and vice versa. First, the chapter briefly looks at the rise of the Alt-Right as a social movement and moves to discussing the development and emergence of Alt-Right gangs into the public realm, with particular attention paid to their transition from the digital environment to the material world. This includes a discussion of why these groups are classified as gangs, the definition of an Alt-Right gang, and the characteristics such gangs generally have. Second, Proud Boys, an Alt-Right gang, is presented as a case study to investigate how members utilize mainstream digital platforms (i.e., Gab) by analyzing what is discussed online, their online social networks, and their online behaviors before and after violent events in the real world (e.g., Charlottesville). The chapter ends with discussing how the triangulation of analyses at different levels (word clouds, persons, and events) provides a valuable lens to understand the relationship between the online activity of Alt-Right gang members and real-world action.

6.2 The Alt-Right’s Ascendancy

The Alt-Right (an abbreviation for Alternative Right) was coined, arguably, in 2008 by Richard Spencer (Hawley, 2017, 2019; Main, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Neiwert, 2017, Stern, 2019; Waring, 2018, 2019; Wendling, 2018). In the last decade, the

constellation of the far-right individuals and groups that fall under the umbrella of the Alt-Right has evolved. The Alt-Right today presents itself as a far-right social/political movement of young millennials that are tech-savvy, leaderless, loosely organized, and use facetious Internet jargon to mainstream and restyle white supremacist beliefs through the veneer of western chauvinism or white identity politics (Hawley, 2018, 2019; McVeigh & Estep, 2019; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Overall, the Alt-Right is a confederated movement made up of an assortment of factions that find common cause in opposing political correctness, multiculturalism, globalism, immigration, feminism, and establishment politics, but also championing President Trump (Berger, 2018; Crothers, 2019; Hawley, 2019; Reid & Valasik, 2020; Stern, 2019; Waring, 2018; Wendling, 2018). As such, the Alt-Right remains very “disjointed and more clearly focused on external enemies than its own internal cohesion” (Berger, 2018: 53).

6.3 Emergence of Alt-Right Groups from Digital to Physical

While the manifestation and initial evolution of the Alt-Right began on the Internet and social media, primarily Twitter and Facebook, over the last few years these groups, and their members, have been less anonymous and more public. No longer are members of Alt-Right gangs invisible like some groups of racist skinheads in the past who were characterized as being “inside ... working on their written materials” (Klein, 1995; 22). This sudden increase of activity in the public sphere has been documented by the ever-increasing number of “free speech” rallies (e.g., Berkeley, Charlottesville, New York, Portland, etc.), which regularly conclude with violence (see Neiwert, 2019; Stern, 2019; Vice, 2017). These public exhibitions of criminality and violence by Alt-Right gangs are one piece of a “cafeteria-style” pattern of offending, analogous to conventional street gangs (see Klein, 1995; Klein & Maxson, 2006). In fact, prior research has shown that Alt-Right gangs have been involved in acts of violence (DeCook, 2018; Mills, Freilich, & Chermak, 2017; Picciolini, 2017; Rogan, 2017; Simi, 2009; Valasik & Reid, 2018a), property crimes (ADL, 1995; Baron, 1997), identity theft (Freilich, Chermak, & Caspi, 2009; Simi, Smith, & Reeser, 2008), and drug selling. These crimes highlight how the stereotypes portraying the Alt-Right as merely a bunch of “online trolls” or “shit posters” is misaligned with the realities of the Alt-Right. Within the Alt-Right, there are a variety of subgroups which also include members that associate themselves with street-oriented delinquent groups (e.g., 211 Bootboys, B49, Proud Boys, Rise Above Movement, etc.). Following the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville there was speculation that the Alt-Right would recede back to their online free spaces (e.g., Gab, reddit, 4chan, 8chan, Twitter), yet this has not been the case. In fact, there has been an even greater push for face-to-face communication between Alt-Right gang members, as observed by members of Proud Boys routinely meeting to drink and hang out. The Internet’s anonymity no longer benefits these groups with increasing surveillance by police, journalists, and watchdog organizations like the Southern

Poverty Law Center (SPLC), Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Antifa (“anti-fascist”) groups (Cosgrove, 2018; Feuer, 2018; Hall, 2018; VICE News, 2018).

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the overlap that exists in the membership of these Alt-Right groups when categorizing them. Researchers and law enforcement have also noted that youth can, and do, switch between racist and non-racist skinhead groups marking a fluidity to Alt-Right gang membership (Borgeson & Valeri, 2018; Christensen, 1994). Similar patterns have been documented among conventional street gangs, commonly referred to as “hybrid gangs,” where members switch affiliations or join multiple groups (see Bolden, 2012, 2014). For example, several members of Proud Boys also have affiliations with local, street-based racist skinhead gangs such as, 211 Bootboys, and Battalion 49 (First Vigil, 2019). As with street gangs, it is important to remember that Alt-Right gangs exist on a spectrum. From loosely organized, neighborhood-based gangs, all the way to highly structured organizations focused on just a particular subset of crimes (e.g., drugs, fraud, extortion). This pattern also holds true for Alt-Right gang’s political motivations, as well.

6.4 What Is an Alt-Right Gang?

At the core of the disconnect in the research literature between street gangs and racist skinheads lies a definitional quandary. The definitional disconnect between racist skinheads and street gangs is balanced on the role of ideology as being the key characteristic that distinguishes these two groups (Reid & Valasik, 2018). Through a review of the skinhead and gang literature, the “otherness” of skinhead youth as compared to street gang youth is often focused on the mythology around skinheads as “the foot soldiers” of the far right (Baysinger, 2006; Christensen, 1994; Moore, 1993) and bastions of the working class ideal (Pollard, 2016). When examining the range of gang definitions (see Reid & Valasik, 2020), it is not a true definitional distinction between street gangs and white power gangs that has researchers “removing” white power youth from larger gang studies, but rather a reliance on an outdated understanding of the youth and these groups.

For researchers, the Eurogang definition “has become widely adopted and appears regularly in publications” and could be considered the most appropriated, modern definition for determining what is a street gang (Maxson & Esbensen, 2016: 7). The Eurogang definition actually would capture Alt-Right gangs (i.e., racist skinheads), but a minor adaption of the definition creates a focused definition to capture these gangs specifically.

Building from, and complementing, the Eurogang definition, Reid and Valasik (2020) define an Alt-Right gang as

A durable, public-oriented group (both digitally and physically) whose adoption of signs and symbols of the white power movement and involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity.

First, in order to be a durable group an Alt-Right gang must exist for several months, despite a churning membership. Researchers have found that most gang members desist from their gangs, leaving after just a couple years (Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). The ceasing of group participation within short periods of time is also true for group members within the broader WPM (Belew, 2018; Tenold, 2018). Gang durability is marked not by the continuation of the same gang members, but rather the endurance of the group despite the turnover of members.

Alt-Right gangs direct their activities toward public spaces, including both digital and physical space. In the digital realm, this would include public forums and imageboards (e.g., reddit, 4chan, 8chan, etc.) and/or social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Gab) where Alt-Right gang members are able to interact with fellow members but also harass and troll nonmembers (Nagle, 2017; Stern, 2019; VICE News, 2019). Conventionally, public spaces would encompass any location outside of any gang member's residence (e.g., street corner, park, bar, club, etc.). The argument that Reid and Valasik (2020) make is that Alt-Right gangs are only able to intimidate others if their presence and activities are not obscured from the general public, but rather are being publicly displayed, whether digitally or physically. Additionally, the public spaces where Alt-Right gangs manifest are ineffectively supervised by social control agents.

The adoption of white power symbols/signs as a component of an Alt-Right gang's identity includes an array of ideological imagery (e.g., swastikas, SS bolts, 88, 14, Pepe the Frog, etc.), which could be presented on banners, clothing or tattoos (see ADL, 1995; Fielitz & Thurston, 2019; Miller-Idriss, 2018; Pollard, 2016; Sarabia & Shriver, 2004; Simi & Futrell, 2015). Alt-Right gangs do not view the imagery of the WPM as being unacceptable to display in public. Yet, there has also been pressure in the larger WPM to mainstream and minimize the public display of traditional far-right ideological imagery, including Alt-Right gangs, and to employ novel signs/symbols (e.g., the "OK" hand sign) that are more easily disguised in conventional society (ADL, 2017; Cooter, 2006; Miller-Idriss, 2018; Neiwert, 2018; Simi & Futrell, 2015). Tied to this mainstreaming has also been the commercialization of clothing brands (e.g., Thor Steinar, Erik and Sons, Ansgar Aryan) that appeal to far-right groups by intentionally embedding white power symbols/signs directly into their merchandise (Miller-Idriss, 2018). Alt-Right gangs have also appropriated mainstream brands (i.e., New Balance, Papa Johns) as white power symbols (Jan, 2017; Mettler, 2016). For these reasons, the definition focuses on the adoption of these signs/symbols rather than an ideology (see below).

The final element of Reid and Valasik's (2020) definition is that a group's identity also emphasizes involvement in illegal activity. Such behaviors must extend beyond annoying activities and actually be criminal. Just like conventional street gangs, the participation in a range of criminality and violence is what distinguishes Alt-Right gangs from other social groups (e.g., sports teams, fraternal organizations, etc.) despite their attempts to portray themselves as such. It should also be noted that while bias/hate-motivated crimes are included within illegal activities, these acts are relatively infrequent compared to other types of criminality.

6.4.1 *Role of Ideology/Cultural Identity*

Ideology is often discussed when highlighting differences between conventional street gangs and Alt-Right gangs, yet the ideological/political activities of these groups exist on a spectrum and should be considered descriptors of these groups, not definers. As a descriptor, researchers are able to move away from examining each group unique to its own distinctive ideology and instead focus on risk factors and behaviors of these groups rather than focusing on categorizing them (Reid & Valasik, 2018, 2020; Valasik & Reid, 2019). There is no universal ideology uniting all Alt-Right groups, with different gangs adopting whichever ideological elements that suit them. Similarly, there is no one proscribed set of beliefs that conventional street gangs adopt, and each group's political activities can also vary. Furthermore, the integration of ideology into a gang's identity does not make it less of a gang as scholars of conventional street gangs have revealed that political ideology and/or ethnic/race-based pride is not limited to only members of Alt-Right gangs (see Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Cureton, 2011; Tapia, 2019). The marginalization of Latinx/Chicano and Black youth has even prompted some conventional street gangs to incorporate a political ideology (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Cureton, 2011; Hughes & Short, 2006; Montejano, 2010; Short, 1974; Short & Moland, 1976). Additionally, some conventional street gangs also integrate spiritual or religious principles into the group. The Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation (ALKQN) created a spirituality of liberation as a tool of resistance against American society's dominant culture objectifying, dehumanizing, and criminalizing their group's membership (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

6.4.2 *Use of Physical and Digital Space as Territory*

Research on conventional street gangs' connections between local geography and patterns of behavior reveals "the social relationships binding the members of a gang to the broader community are complex and sometimes competing" (Valasik & Tita, 2018: 843). Alt-Right gangs are no exception. Traditional street gang research has regarded Alt-Right gangs (i.e., racist skinheads) as being less territorial than conventional street gangs (see Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Hamm, 1993; Klein, 1995). However, conventional street gangs exist on a spectrum of mobility and territoriality patterns (see Klein, 1995; Valasik & Tita, 2018). A handful of studies explicitly show the complex relationship between Alt-Right gangs and their use of space (see Futrell & Simi, 2004; Simi, 2009; Simi & Futrell, 2015; Simi et al., 2008). Alt-Right gangs' very nature, their "whiteness," imparts its members the belief they have a "natural dominion" over any space they occupy (Simi & Futrell, 2015: 55). Based on this point of view, there may be less of a necessity for Alt-Right gang members to demarcate and preserve a territory. As such, some Alt-Right gangs do not defend a particular turf while others are extremely territorial. For example,

Simi et al.'s (2008: 766) examination of Public Enemy Number One (PEN1), an Alt-Right gang, focuses their street-oriented, antisocial behaviors within specific neighborhoods, making their bias/racist activities "territorial and localized." Additionally, Alt-Right gangs, similar to conventional street gangs (see Valasik & Tita, 2018), use space to reinforce their collective identity and maintain group solidarity by naming their groups after the communities they occupy, such as *Huntington Beach Skins*, *LaMirada Punk* (LMP), and *Norwalk Skins*. Simi and Futrell (2015: 4) reveal that Alt-Right gangs regularly congregate in Aryan free spaces "where white power members meet with one another, openly express their extremist beliefs, and coordinate their activities" (see also Futrell & Simi, 2004). Aryan free spaces typically exist in benign locations (e.g., bars, crash pads, residences, local hangouts) that do not draw attention of nonmembers and allow the groups' oppositional identity against mainstream society to be expressed and cultivated (Futrell & Simi, 2004; Simi & Futrell, 2015). Thus, Aryan free spaces are similar to the localized, geographically distinct set spaces (e.g., street corners, parks, alleys, etc.) where conventional street gangs gather (see Blasko, Roman, & Taylor, 2015; Brantingham, Tita, Short, & Reid, 2012; Tita, Cohen, & Engberg, 2005; Valasik, 2018). Aryan free spaces provide Alt-Right gangs a definitive space where members can feel safe and their behavior can be unrestrained. Even though Alt-Right gangs may develop and spawn from the virtual world, members' actions do pervade into the material world (Castle & Parsons, 2019; Stern, 2019). A well-documented example being the Unite the Right rally and its violent results (Atkinson, 2018; Hawley, 2017, 2019; Lough, 2018; McAuliffe, 2019; Wendling, 2018).

It is not surprising given the Alt-Right's online origins, along with the WPM's longstanding presence on the Internet (see Belew, 2018; Morris, 2017; Simpson & Druxes, 2015; Winter, 2019), that members of Alt-Right gangs use "virtual Aryan free spaces" equal to or greater than their use of Aryan free spaces in the material world (Reid & Valasik, 2020). It is within these online spaces that Alt-Right gang members are able to post social media (i.e., photos, videos, memes, documents), chat/direct message, play racist games, listen to white power music, plan meetups/activities, and even educate children (see; Burriss, Smith, & Strahm, 2000; Castle & Parsons, 2019; Daniels, 2009; Fielitz & Thurston, 2019; Lewis, 2018; Morris, 2017; Saslow, 2018; Simi & Futrell, 2015; Tynes, Rose, & Markoe, 2013). Until recently, members' activities have been generally relegated to online niche communities like *Stormfront* or *The Daily Stormer* (O'Brien, 2017; Perry & Scrivens, 2019; Winter, 2019). What makes Alt-Right gangs more unique is their use and proficiency of utilizing mainstream digital platforms to connect members, propagandize, harass rivals, and enlist new members (DeCook, 2018; Fielitz & Thurston, 2019; Klein, 2019; Nagle, 2017; Phillips, Bagavathi, Reid, Valasik, & Krishnan, 2018; Pollard, 2018; Simi & Futrell, 2015; Stern, 2019; Zannettou et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018). Alt-Right gangs, however, are not just a bunch of online trolls, as the seriousness of the criminal offenses in the material world attests (see First Vigil, 2019). In the wake of their digital footprint they are causing a stream of violence in the material world.

6.5 Case Study: The Proud Boys

Self-described as a “western chauvinist” men’s club, reminiscent to an exclusive, fraternal organization (e.g., Elks Lodge), Proud Boys was established by Gavin McInnes in 2016 (DeCook, 2018; Proud Boys, 2019; Reid & Valasik, 2020; Rogan, 2017; Valasik & Reid, 2018b). Yet, Proud Boys “very much function like a fraternity or more accurately, a gang; their gatherings often involve heavy amounts of drinking and violence, there are rituals involved in gaining status in the group, and there is a uniform and agreed upon logo (including colors) to signify their group identity” (DeCook, 2018: 7). While non-gang scholars explicitly indicate that Proud Boys are a gang, it is still necessary to evaluate their characteristics, comparing them to the components in Reid and Valasik’s (2020) Alt-Right gang definition to discern if they qualify.

The first element to assess is durability. Proud Boys have existed since 2016 with local and regional groups forming under the Proud Boys umbrella, similar to other gang nations (i.e., Bloods, Crips, Peoples, Folks, etc.) (see Descormiers & Morselli, 2011; Hagedorn, 1988; Roks, 2018; Van Hellefont & Densley, 2019) and cropping up around the United States (McCabe, 2018; Proud Boys, 2019; Rogan, 2017).

Another feature of an Alt-Right gang is having both a digital footprint and manifesting in the material world. Proud Boys, like conventional street gangs (see Klein, 1995), spend the majority of their time bonding through “hanging out and drinking beer” (Stern, 2019: 71). It is at these local pubs where members are well known and feel secure from outsiders/rivals (see Antoine, 2018; Disser, 2016; Wicentowski, 2018). Unlike conventional street gangs, however, Proud Boys also utilize a variety of digital media (e.g., social media, Web videos, online magazines, etc.) to not only maintain group solidarity and identity, but also to strategically spread their rhetoric and propaganda to potential recruits through a variety of platforms (DeCook, 2018; Hatmaker, 2018; Klein, 2019; Stern, 2019).

In terms of being involved in illegal activities, Proud Boys focus much of their activities around public intimidation, harassment, disorderly conduct, and actively call for, and participate in, violence (i.e., assault, battery, rioting, and murder) (Coaston, 2018b; DeCook, 2018; First Vigil, 2019; SPLC, 2019; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). DeCook (2018: 12) highlights Proud Boys’ calls for violence against Antifa who view them “as the true enemy of the Christian, white ethnonationalist west because of their embrace of socialism and multiculturalism. By positioning them as the enemy, the solidification of an ‘out-group’ strengthens the in-group’ identity” (see also, Rogan, 2017; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019).

While not a defining quality, but rather a descriptor, Proud Boys publicly adorn themselves with a particular set of colors, black and yellow, and a mascot, a cockerel, as a public display of membership, mirroring members of conventional gangs. This logo and these colors are routinely displayed by Proud Boys’ members, who wear a unique uniform of black Fred Perry polo shirts adorned with yellow piping (Beery, 2017; Cauterucci, 2017; Sommer, 2017; SPLC, 2019; Swenson, 2017; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). Beyond Proud Boys’ aesthetic and cultural style, like many

others in the larger Alt-Right movement, members routinely use the “OK” hand sign as another mechanism to identify themselves and their group within the larger WPM (see ADL, 2017; Neiwert, 2018; Reid & Valasik, 2020). While the symbols/signs used by Proud Boys were not originally considered images of the WPM, their regular use has made them unmistakably associated with Alt-Right gangs.

Overall, based upon Proud Boys’ characteristics, it is clear the group meets Reid and Valasik’s (2020) criteria to be considered an Alt-Right gang. Yet, there is another important consideration. On February 23, 2017, during an interview on the Joe Rogan Experience podcast Gavin McInnes publicly declared “I started this gang called the Proud Boys” (Rogan, 2017). Even though self-nomination is not a requirement for Reid and Valasik (2020), prior studies on conventional gangs have seen self-nomination as one of the most robust indicators of gang involvement and embeddedness (Esbensen, Osgood, Taylor, Peterson, & Freng, 2001; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Webb, Katz, & Decker, 2006).

6.6 Data and Methodology of the Case Study

6.6.1 Data

[Gab.com/Gab.ai](https://gab.com/Gab.ai) (Gab) is a social media forum founded in August 2016. Even though the description and posting format of the forum are similar to popular counterparts like Twitter and Facebook, Gab is unique. Gab is framed as a site that supports individual liberty and free speech in the social media community (Gab, 2019). Similar to Twitter, users generate posts, limited to 300 characters, and can include links, images, polls, and gifs (Gab, 2019). The only limitations are vague assurances about restrictive policies over posts from users promoting terrorism, violence, and pornography. Gab attracts a very particular set of users which are not as diverse as other social media platforms, ranging from standard far-right posts through extreme-right rhetoric and conspiracy theories (see Phillips et al., 2018). Users of Gab can share information via *posts* (referred to as “gabs”), *post replies*, and *quotes/reshares*. This analysis uses Gab data collected from both an internal web crawler and Baumgartner’s publicly available Gab dataset (see Fair & Wesslen, 2019; Pushshift.io, 2019). Figure 6.1 gives an overview of the dataset as a time series plot with the number of posts, replies, and quotes appearing on Gab between August 2016 and October 2018. The dataset is a comprehensive collection with 34 million posts, replies, quotes, approximately 15,000 user groups and about 300,000 public users. It is evidential from Fig. 6.1 that our dataset is composed of 55% posts, 30% replies, and 15% quotes. This data also contains a complete set of metadata like time, attachments, likes, dislikes, replies, and quotes, along with the original post and the details of the user. Due to the unique OpenAPI format of Gab, compared to other social media sites (i.e., Twitter), this dataset is the complete universe of public Gab posts during this time period.

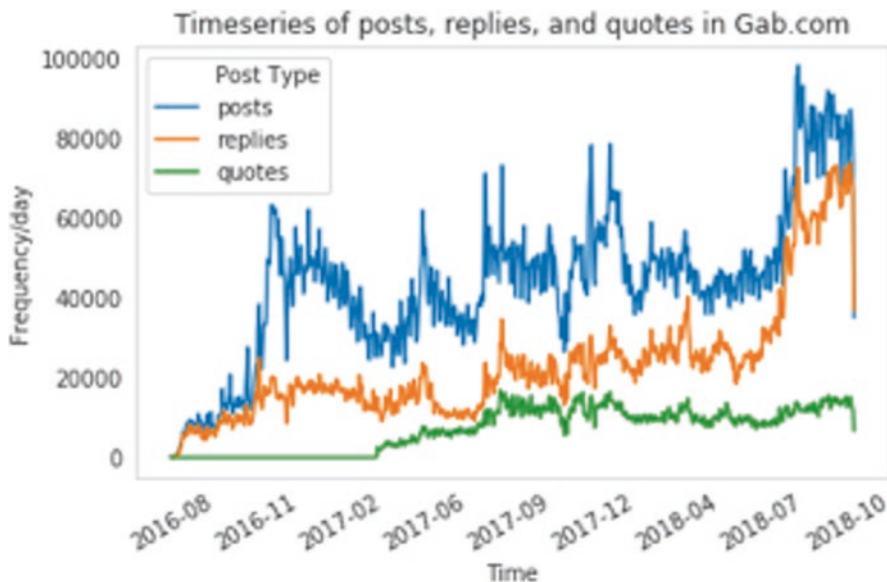


Fig. 6.1 Time series of the frequency of posts, replies, and reshares from August 2016, the origin of Gab, until the last week of October 2018 when the forum was temporarily suspended

6.6.2 Analysis

The current analysis is a qualitative examination of the online activity of Proud Boys' members on Gab. Since the mechanisms that move or help manifest online activity into the real world remain a black box to scholars, this study explores the online conversations of Proud Boys, their connectedness to each other, and how online activity shifts around real-world events to better understand these obscure processes. We analyze all self-nominated Proud Boys in the Gab sample, and compare them to the larger Gab population. First, we make a comparison at the group-level, next focus on several Proud Boys individually, and then do a temporal review around two key events (e.g., Charlottesville). To do this, we first present word cloud visualizations. At the group level, we utilize word cloud visualizations to examine variation in online dialogue. By comparing Proud Boys users to both the overall community of Gab users, and to a known far-right extremist user, the Tree of Life Synagogue shooter, we can better explore how the themes and words posted by members of Proud Boys compare. These comparisons allow for the examination of Proud Boys' language to discern if they are more reflective of the broader Gab audience, align more with extreme-right users, or reflect a more gang-oriented language specific to Alt-Right gangs.

Word cloud visualizations use the size and color of words to highlight their repeated usage in an individual's or group of individual's posts (Wattenberg & Viégas, 2008). These word cloud visualizations allow for a visual comparison of

what types of words or phrases are seen within and across people and groups. We also compare and contrast the 25 most commonly used terms posted by each on Gab, focusing particularly on their top five words, to look for patterns across groups. The second set of analyses is focused on a subset of Proud Boys who are active on Gab throughout the data collection period. Since Proud Boys portray themselves as a fraternity of brothers, rather than an Alt-Right gang, we also examine their individual word clouds, and perform a network analysis of their conversations to better understand their level of connectedness to each other. We conclude with a temporal analysis of Gab posts comparing the 2 months prior to an event with the 2 months following. The two events examined are a far-right “Free Speech” rally in Berkeley, California, and the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The goal of this series of analyses is to lay a foundation to better understand the relationship between online and offline behaviors of Alt-Right gangs and their members.

6.7 Results and Discussion

6.7.1 Group-Level Analysis

The first set of results are the group-level word clouds that examine variation in the themes and words used by Proud Boys, the broader Gab population, and the Tree of Life Synagogue shooter. Comparing these word clouds allows us to better understand the differences and similarities across groups of people, from your average Gab user, to an ideologically driven lone shooter to discern where on the ideological spectrum Proud Boys fall. By better understanding how members of Proud Boys compare to these others we can qualitatively consider how to differentiate Alt-Right gangs online when self-nomination is less discernable.

Looking at the word cloud visualization for the sample of self-nominated Proud Boys’ members active on Gab, there are several terms frequently used (see Fig. 6.2). Descending in sequential order, the top five words are *Twitter*, *Gab*, *Deus Vult*, *Trump*, and *Patriots*. Unpacking the context related to these terms provides a broader understanding of the online behaviors and focus of Proud Boys’ gangs and their members. Given that Gab is praised particularly by those in the far right as a “free-speech” Twitter alternative, it is unsurprising these two terms (Gab and Twitter) are regularly posted as individuals involved in the Alt-Right (e.g., Proud Boys) are continually getting suspended, banned or de-platformed from more mainstream social media platforms (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, etc.), and they reconvene on Gab (see Fielitz & Thurston, 2019; Klein, 2019; Livni, 2019; Owen, 2018; Wilson, 2016). Proud Boys’ members are espousing their affection for Gab and their animosity toward Twitter for preventing their use of mainstream social media platforms as tools to spread their far-right rhetoric, recruit new members, maintain ties, intimidate and attack rivals (e.g., Antifa groups), and organize real-world activities.



Fig. 6.2 Aggregated word cloud of gabs, reposts, and reshares involving a sample of Proud Boys users, from August 2016 to October 2018. (Source: [WordClouds.com](https://www.wordclouds.com/))

The term *Deus Vult*, Latin for “God wills it,” was a battle cry used during the First Crusade and has long been associated with Islamophobia (Hagen, 2018; Kim, 2018). Recently, it has become an online meme used by the Alt-Right (Hagen, 2018; Kim, 2018). Similar to other memes used by Proud Boys (see DeCook, 2018), a meme like *Deus Vult* is a nostalgic attempt to create a revisionist history, selectively pulling rhetoric aligning with and endorsing their “western chauvinist” mantra. Such a meme is aimed at promoting the idea that “West Is Best”, invoking a need for a warlike, racially motivated defense of Christian values against the delusion of a Muslim invasion or the ongoing “white genocide,” a far-right conspiracy theory (see Klein, 2019; Saslow, 2018). Additionally, the appropriation of a group of crusader knights banding together reinforces the fraternal ethos espoused by Proud Boys, who even established a Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK), a paramilitary stylized clique in the gang (DeCook, 2018; Finn, 2019; SPLC, 2019; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). The *Deus Vult* theme also connects with the corrupt use of the term “Patriot,” instead of the less endearing term of nationalist (see Crothers, 2019; Kimmelmeier & Winter, 2008; Klein, 2019; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019), as a xenophobic call justifying the use of force and violence to protect western society from outsiders (i.e., nonwhites). Last is Proud Boys’ repetitive use of the term “Trump.” Proud Boys are supportive of President Trump and based upon the President’s tweets feel that he supports them (see Aleem, 2019; DeCook, 2018; Finn, 2019; Kaplan, 2019; Klein, 2019; Reid & Valasik, 2020; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019).

Figure 6.3 highlights the word cloud visualization for the overall population of Gab users. The results of this analysis show a slightly different pattern of word usage. The top five words, descending in sequential order, are *MAGA*, *gabfam*, *Trump*, *news*, and *speakingfreely*. As observed with Proud Boys, the Gab community has not only become a haven for the more austere Alt-Right, but also the more mainstream right wing, conservative personalities, sometimes referred to as the “Alt-lite”

space for the Alt-Right and larger WPM to utilize for their own purposes. These analyses also highlight how widespread the championing of President Trump is throughout Gab, with the routinized use of terms like “MAGA” and “Trump.” The fact that President Trump’s incendiary rhetoric of coded language and dog whistles (e.g., globalist, invader, nationalist) not only permeates but also resonates with Gab users, Alt-Right gang members, and far-right extremists is concerning. McVeigh and Estep (2019: 225) advise that “[w]hite nationalism is most consequential when it enters the mainstream – so mainstream, in this case, that it captured the White House.” “Dubbed the ‘Trump Effect,’ this resurgent white supremacy is real and violent: in the weeks following Trump’s win, hate crimes in the US surged to a level not seen since the days immediately after 9/11” (Perry & Scrivens, 2018: 184). Despite the existence of a relationship between President Trump and the Alt-Right, it remains unclear how it exactly operates, except that it has been mutually beneficial for both, bestowing a propagandist platform that can be exploited by the Alt-Right for their own advantage (see Crothers, 2019; Finn, 2019; Hawley, 2019; Lyons, 2018; Main, 2018; McVeigh & Estep, 2019; Mudde, 2018; Neiwert, 2017; Paxton, 2018; Saslow, 2018; Stern, 2019; Tenold, 2018). Supporting President Trump becomes the lynchpin holding these three types of users together, even potentially facilitating the process transforming a general Gab user into an Alt-Right gang or radicalizing into a far-right extremist.

Another word linking Proud Boys to the overall Gab community is *Islam*. Proud Boys’ self-expressed Islamophobia, as observed with terms such as *Deus Vult*, corresponds with the group’s “western chauvinism,” and the rhetoric that they are fighting a Muslim invasion (DeCook, 2018; Hagen, 2018; Kim, 2018; Klein, 2019). As Fig. 6.5 shows, the fact that the larger Gab community appears even more sympathetic to this corrupt point of view is concerning, and provides another bridge linking Alt-Right gangs, like Proud Boys, to less extreme Gab users. It is these more mainstream voices (e.g., Alt-Lite) that may actually act as conduits that could seduce unaffiliated individuals to increasingly align with Alt-Right gangs or even eventually radicalize to the extreme right (Stern, 2019; Wendling, 2018).

6.7.2 *Individual-Level Analysis*

The next series of analyses examines specifically a subset of self-nominated Proud Boys’ members on Gab at the individual and group levels. By focusing on this group of Proud Boys the aim is to better understand how the group structure contributes to not only the rhetoric and online subculture but also organizing in the physical world. The first set of analyses begins with looking at three different categories of Proud Boys members using Gab: the official Gab account of the Proud Boys gang (@*theproudboysusa*), an active Proud Boys’ member (@*proudboy1*), and a Proud Boys’ member that is an influencer on social media (@*1776realnews*). Subsequently, the reach and connectivity of Proud Boys’ members in the larger Gab community are examined along with the degree to which members are tied to other Proud Boys.

consequential than they are in reality. This elaboration includes being more highly organized, controlling lots of territory or having lots of cliques/chapters, having hierarchical leadership, and driving crime patterns (Felson, 2006). Such myth-making has not only been a feature among conventional street gangs but also Alt-Right gangs. For instance, the Hammerskins, thought to be the most exhaustive racist skinhead gang in the United States, had only around 500 members, even though there were upwards of more than 5000 racist skinheads nationwide (Picciolini, 2017). The myth that Proud Boys are a highly organized, hierarchical group is also supported by *@theproudboysusa*'s overall lack of importance in the Proud Boys social network on Gab, with the Proud Boys' official account having only a handful of ties with other Proud Boys' users (see Fig. 6.7).

Next, the online behavior of a garden-variety Proud Boys' member, *@proudboy1*, is examined. Similar to the official Gab account of the Proud Boys, *@proudboy1* has a limited number of gabs (22). Again this suggests that Gab is less desirable to use than more mainstream social media platforms. Table 6.1 also indicates that *@proudboy1* also has less than a third of the followers (104) than *@theproudboysusa*. This is not surprising, since it is expected the Proud Boys official account would have a greater number of followers, ties, and influence than any nondescript member. There seems to be somewhat of a similar pattern in the most commonly used words by *@proudboy1* with his top five words, in descending order, *Proud*, *Boys*, *Portland*, *Facebook*, and *Gab* (see Fig. 6.8). Again, the publicizing of Proud Boys is

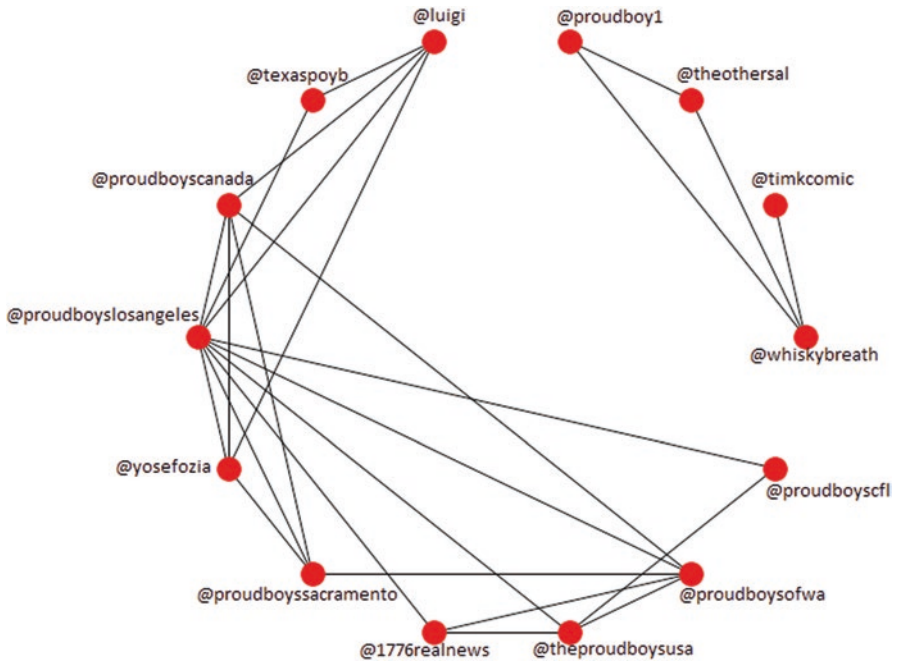


Fig. 6.7 Sociogram of friendship ties between self-nominated Proud Boys members on Gab

& Futrell, 2015). This process of indoctrinating members is critical for Alt-Right gangs, building a community with a similar viewpoint and clearly defining an in-group (e.g., Proud Boys) and out-groups/rivals (e.g., Antifa) (see Reid & Valasik, 2020). Given the greater online stature and clout of @1776realnews on Gab and other social media platforms, it is interesting to see the variety of words that are frequently used. @1776realnews's top five words are, in descending order, *Twitter*, *Deus Vult*, *Gab*, *Patriots*, and *Trump*. Again, the pattern of frequently mentioning both Twitter and Gab is most likely the admonishment of the former and praising the latter, given that Twitter has banned @1776realnews several times. The divergence @1776realnews makes from both @theproudboysusa and @proudboy1 is the use of the terms *Deus Vult* and *Patriots*. The purposeful use of this coded language is to incite xenophobia and suggest that violence and force are required to dispel an invasion of nonwhites from entering or attempt to make nonwhites “go back” to their “country of origin” (see ADL, 2019; Simon & Sidner, 2019). The reach and influence of social media influencers like @1776realnews provide Proud Boys and other Alt-Right gangs with a mouthpiece that is able to push incendiary and abhorrent rhetoric into the mainstream and make it seem less so given their perceived authenticity and virtue.

6.7.3 Event Analysis

The final set of analyses are focused on trying to better understand if online dialogue prior to and after a real-world event can help identify future events requiring greater attention and possible intervention. These events, with the violence and incendiary rhetoric that comes with them, often shock local communities where these events take place, even when a city has experienced a prior event. The first event examined is a far-right “Free Speech” rally that took place in Berkeley, California, on April 18, 2017. The rally was unauthorized but heavily publicized by individuals angry that Ann Coulter’s UC Berkeley appearance was cancelled. This event was attended by a variety of Alt-Right groups and gangs, including Proud Boys, Identity Evropa, and Oathkeepers, and concluded with 20 arrests after violent incidents broke out with counter-protesters (Bauer, 2017; Montgomery, 2017). Figure 6.10 displays the word cloud visualizations for self-identified Proud Boys’ members 2 months before and after this rally.

For the pre-event word cloud, the most commonly used terms of the top 25 words are *Trump*, *Obama*, *white*, *President*, *Twitter*, *Left*, *media*, *America*, and *Gab*. After the event, the top words shift order slightly to *Trump*, *white*, *Obama*, *President*, *Gab*, *love*, *first*, *great*, *left*, and *America*. As noted above, the appearance of the terms *Trump*, *Gab*, and *Twitter* have been seen repeatedly within the word clouds of Proud Boys and the larger Gab community. The increased use of the terms *white* and *free speech* after the event are interesting since they highlight some of the rhetoric around Proud Boys and other Alt-Right gangs using the guise of free speech to promote their anti-multicultural, xenophobic, and pro-white beliefs. The words shown

Berkeley Rally April 2017



Fig. 6.10 Aggregated word cloud of gabs, reposts, and reshares on Gab 2 months prior to the April 18, 2017, Berkeley, CA, “Free Speech” rally and the 2 months following the event. (Source: WordClouds.com)

Unite the Right Rally



Fig. 6.11 Aggregated word cloud of gabs, reposts, and reshares on Gab 2 months prior to the August 11–12, 2017, Charlottesville, VA, Unite the Right rally and the 2 months following the event. (Source: WordClouds.com)

are generally neutral and reflect the general leanings of the broader Gab user community. Missing from this event word cloud were the coded words (e.g., *Deus Vult*, patriot) or derogatory descriptors (e.g., vile). The overall lack of organization-based discussion may be due to the timing of the event happening before many of these users were de-platformed from the other major social media sites. More of the organization may have taken place on mainstream sites (e.g., Twitter or Facebook). In the post-event word cloud, Breitbart and media appear and may be partially due to the differential framing of the events of this rally by both Breitbart and the larger “fake” media. Much of the shift between the pre- and post-Berkeley rally reflects the “free speech” rhetoric that was used to frame this rally after reports of the violence and arrests came out.

The second event is the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 11th and 12th, 2017, that ended in the death of Heather Heyer and multiple other violent incidents and arrests (see McAuliffe, 2019). The Unite the Right rally was a shocking visual specter of the Alt-Right with white males brandishing tiki

torches and screaming “You will not replace us” and “Blood and soil.” A common question both law enforcement and the general public asked was, “Could this have been prevented?” and the examination of the online Gab dialogue may provide us with some insights. Figure 6.11 highlights the 2 months before and after Unite the Right rally for all Gab users. Again, as the Unite the Right rally drew crowds from a range of Alt-Right gangs, far-right groups, and other fringe entities all Gab users were included in this analysis.

For the pre-event word cloud, 52 percent of the top 25 words are German (i.e. *die, und, ist, nicht, auf, and ein*) and the other words in descending order are *Trump, White, Gab, CNN, President, Left, America, love, Twitter, and media*. While it is unclear why there is such a heavy presence of German articles and transition words, it seems likely the words are used to troll other users with basic German (see Burack, 2017). A search of German events revealed that Germany’s general election took place on September 24, 2017, and in the prelude to that event there was a rise of far-right activity online, including on Gab, which could explain the presence of German terms in the word cloud (Der Spiegel, 2017). That being said, the use of these basic German conjunctions, prepositions, and articles along with the lack of German nouns, makes it seem more likely that the use of these terms is “ironic” trolling behavior of the Alt-Right rather than a real German discussion. Again, there is not a lot of organizational discussions happening prior to the Unite the Right rally but the appearance of German words is interesting since it highlights what may be a very particular type of trolling that should be explored across social media platforms. The post-event word cloud is much more reflective of what we expected to see in the aftermath of this type of event. The high-volume words include *White, Trump, Gab, free, Left, speech, America, Jews, media, Black, Antifa, and hate*. There are still some German conjunctions, prepositions, and articles included in this list (i.e., *die, und, and war*) as well. The post-event word cloud highlights much of the rhetoric seen during the Unite the Right rally, with the dialogue now including *Jew, Black, Antifa, and hate* most likely in a negative connotation. *White, Trump, and Gab* are more central to the overall online discussion which makes sense considering the pro-white and pro-Trump responses in the aftermath of this event. It is the post-event word cloud that helps us better frame how events, and which elements of an event, spread online. The volume shift of dialogue toward Alt-Right and far-right rhetoric on Gab after Unite the Right is an important indication of how these types of events impact online activity.

6.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, we described the phenomenon of Alt-right gangs and their background, and argued that they meet the criteria of a definition of such groups based on the Eurogang definition of street gangs. A case study of one Alt-Right gang, the Proud Boys, was aimed at exploring the role of social media in helping Alt-Right gangs to advance their rhetoric, viewpoints, and subculture online and to understand

how this online rhetoric connects to real-world violence. We qualitatively examined the online presence of both the Proud Boys and the larger Gab community to better understand differences and similarities across people and groups. User-driven word cloud visualizations helped identify and compare how ideology is expressed and where it falls on the hierarchy of online discussions for these different groups. Much of the online discussions by the majority of members in Proud Boys, and even from their official account on Gab, does not resemble the more austere points-of-view of far-right extremists (e.g., the shooter responsible for the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue). Instead Proud Boys are more in-line with the overall tone of the Gab community, pushing the generalized talking points of the broader Alt-Right movement (i.e., anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism, xenophobia, etc.). In fact, Proud Boys discussion looks like what we would expect from other conventional gang members online trash-talking rivals and calling attention to their group's particular brand.

Our word cloud visualizations around events did not show any high-volume discussions of organization for these events. Some of this may be due to many of the members still being active on more mainstream social media sites and organizing on those platforms. It may also be partially due to these events just not being well organized in general, with some events drawing large crowds and others very small crowds but no real understanding as to why there is such variation. The post-event visualizations did help us understand how dialogue online can shift after a major event. The post-Unite the Right rally online word cloud was filled with more overtly incident-driven rhetoric than the pre-rally word cloud. This is valuable as this work moves forward since the immediate aftermath of a violent event (both for traditional gangs and Alt-Right gangs) can be critical in the myth-making around these groups. Early intervention into how this information is spread may help limit some of this.

While this study is one of the first to examine Proud Boys' online to real-world activity using the unique Gab dataset, it is not without limitations. This study focuses on both a small subset of self-nominated Proud Boys and real-world events. Future research should examine a wider range of individuals and events to better understand how generalizable the current findings are and to supplement the dataset for future analyses. It would also be extremely beneficial for future research to examine how individuals and events are discussed across different social media platforms, from more relegated platforms (e.g., 4chan, Gab) to more mainstream ones (e.g., Twitter). This study also targets publicly known Proud Boys, while more reserved members of Proud Boys may have greater levels of online activity but are not known to researchers. Future research should attempt to locate a broader range of individuals involved in Alt-Right gangs to increase the range of understanding about their patterns of online and offline activity.

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Chapter 7

Youth Perspectives on Gangs, Violence, and Social Media in a High Crime City



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7.1 Introduction

Gangs have been a subject of research as far back as the early twentieth century and have been covered extensively by the media in the United States since the 1950s (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). In the 60 years until now, gangs have persisted as an antisocial element of society. However, the ways they function within and outside of society have changed drastically. The street corners often associated with gang activity have been supplemented by the virtual world (Lauger & Densley, 2018). Demonstration of a gang's proclivity toward violence does not always mean physical acts of violence; even a rap video made by a gang and posted online can serve to warn others against conflict with the gang (Lauger & Densley, 2018). For some authors, youth gangs are characterized as some of the most criminogenic social groups (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). It stands to reason that youth gangs would engage in similar activities online, such as promoting gang activity (Patton et al., 2014) and seeking status among their gang and non-gang peers (Patton, Lane, Leonard, Macbeth, & Smith Lee, 2017).

The earliest form of the Internet was invented by a military agency. The Internet was adopted by academics and commercial interests and, over time, has reached most of the planet and is involved in nearly every commercial transaction and most of society's interpersonal contact. People of all ages use the Internet in many different ways to both positive and negative ends. Social media has taken many different forms over the years. Sites such as MySpace allowed a dominantly young

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population to communicate with others about popular culture and extend friendships both within and beyond geographic confines (boyd, 2008). Facebook was initially designed for college-aged students, eventually expanding to include middle and high school students, businesses, and interest groups. New forms of social media and other online interactions are constantly developing (Patton et al., 2014). However, two observations from boyd's (2008) work on social network sites still ring true. Her observation of MySpace applies to every social media technology in the 10 years since her work was published: "...whether one is for it or against it, everyone knows the site and has an opinion on it" (p. 121). The title of her work is also illustrative: "...youths [heart] social network sites..." Youth are often the quickest to adopt new technology, and this has been true for the Internet and every new version of social media.

Some scholars have recently commented on the lack of research on how youth gangs function in contemporary society, especially how they use technology to further their gangs (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013; Stuart, 2019). Much of the existing research on youth gangs in contemporary society has focused explicitly on gang youth, such as through ethnographies of gang-involved youth (i.e. Stuart, 2019; Sullivan, 2005), leading to a lack of research focusing on more general youth samples and how they experience gangs and violence on social media. Our study is designed to address this concern and looks at the social media use of students in an urban environment that have just made the transition from primary school to secondary education. Based on qualitative data gathered through longitudinal, multi-wave, semi-structured interviews, we examine the presence of gangs in this environment and whether those gangs, if present, use social media as a tool to support their gang's interests. We also examine how youths more generally use social media and how it relates to their exposure to violence. We begin by examining the existing literature on gangs, social media, and youths.

7.2 Literature Review

7.2.1 *Gangs and Social Media*

Gangs have been in existence well into previous centuries, however, academic study of them only began in the 1920s (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015). Throughout the literature on gangs, there has been a consensus that gang members commit crimes at a greater rate than non-gang members (Barnes, Beaver, & Miller, 2010; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Huebner, Martin, Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2016). Researchers have conducted observational and panel studies on how gangs are organized, how members are recruited into gangs, and how long and for what reasons they stay in or leave their gang (Leverso & Matsueda, 2019; Melde & Esbensen, 2011). According to Leverso and Matsueda (2019), perceptions of gang organization and gang identity are associated with enduring membership in a gang.

The authors also note that the decision to transition out of gang membership “is strategically signaled to relevant others in the social world” (p. 23). Before the advent of electronic communication, this was accomplished primarily through word-of-mouth.

Gangs and gang members have adapted to using technology both to signal gang entry and exit, and to further gang activity. In the 1990s, pagers were commonly used by gang members to arrange for gang activities such as violence and drug sales (Riley, 2003). Pagers were also seen as a status symbol and a way for gang members to access social and human capital (Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013). This led to law enforcement targeting the use of pagers, akin to other tools used for criminal behavior. In her paper on gang injunctions, Riley (2003) noted that law enforcement was initially hesitant to include pager bans in gang injunctions since they could be used for more legitimate purposes.¹

As the Internet has become more accessible to the general public, gangs have also adapted to its use. Using organizational theory, researchers have examined the diffusion of gang culture through the Internet. For example, Moule, Pyrooz, and Decker (2014) found that gangs with higher levels of reported organization were more likely to engage in online behaviors such as having a website, recruiting new members online, and posting videos. Gangs and individual gang members are active on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, leading researchers to examine these sources for information on gang activities, including violence. Patton et al. (2017) conducted an inductive textual analysis of the Twitter usage of Gakirah (a gang member in Chicago), as it related to the death of a fellow gang member, as well as the Twitter mentions of Gakirah before and after her death. The authors found that Gakirah’s Twitter activity, as well as the activity of others who mentioned her before and after her death, comported with Anderson’s (1999) code of the street, including presenting a “tough front” to others. Such online actions make it readily apparent that youth involved in gangs seek to earn and maintain a tough, respected, status using online platforms (Patton et al., 2017), even if this outwardly tough demeanor never extends beyond mythic violence (Decker, 1996) propagated online. Displaying these behaviors online has been conceptualized as “internet banging” (Patton et al., 2013), where gang members use the Internet to promote gang affiliation and interest in gang activity, report a violent act or communicate threats, and share information and network with gang members in different areas. According to this conceptualization, youths have always found public spaces in which they can engage in the above listed behaviors; the Internet provides a more instant and somewhat more anonymous space where public and private intersect (Patton et al., 2013).

Rap music posted online is another vehicle for promotional or informational gang activity. Patton et al. (2013) pointed to the role of hip-hop identity in enhancing negative societal outcomes such as mass incarceration, unemployment, and poor educational opportunities. Lauger and Densley (2018) analyzed 78 rap videos

¹These civil gang injunctions have been found to be effective at lowering gang visibility in communities in the short term; however, this effectiveness does not extend to the intermediate or long term (Maxson, Hennigan, & Sloane, 2005).

posted on YouTube over a 6-year period by Buffalo, New York, gang members. Rap videos were used by those gang members to develop collective gang identities as well as emphasize their capacity for violence, using YouTube as a “virtual street corner” (Lauger & Densley, 2018, p. 818). According to some researchers, gathering in some sort of public space, such as a street corner, is essential to the character of a gang (Lauger & Densley, 2018; see also Patton et al., 2013). These videos often contain performances of gang identity, using an uneasy combination of authenticity and exaggeration. The gang members’ desire to engage in violence may be authentic, but their ability to carry out the level of violence portrayed in the posted videos may be exaggerated (Decker, 1996; Storrod & Densley, 2017). However, “[s]ocial media has taken hip hop’s place as the medium through which individuals are able to ‘keep it real’” (Patton et al., 2013, p. A58; see also Densley, 2012).

7.2.2 *Youths and Social Media*

As of 2015, 71% of children used the Internet, with the majority of those using it at home (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Over a period of 3 years, this access has dramatically increased to where one survey found that 95% of teens either have a smartphone or have access to one, and nearly half of teens are online “on a near-constant basis” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018, p. 2).

Youths’ choices of preferred social media platforms have shifted over the past 10 years. MySpace was launched in the fall of 2003 and was initially targeted toward bands looking to promote their music online (boyd, 2008). The next dominant player in social media, Facebook, started in 2004 as a platform for college students, expanding to high school students in 2005, and dropping its minimum age to 13 in 2006 (Greiner, Fiegerman, Sherman, & Baker, 2019). Though Facebook claims over 1.5 billion daily active users (Facebook, 2019), there is growing social media competition. For instance, over 1 billion hours of video are viewed on YouTube every day (YouTube, 2019), Instagram has over 500 million daily active users (Instagram, 2019), and Snapchat has 190 million daily active users (Snap Inc., 2019).

In comparison to the subset of adult gang members who use social media to create a persona of violence and aggression, youths use social media for several different reasons. Youths have been shown to still primarily use social media and digital technologies to strengthen and maintain existing friendships (White, Weinstein, & Selman, 2018). Both Twitter and Snapchat were initially designed as short-form programs to more quickly deliver one’s content to the online world; Twitter’s initial limit of 140 characters per message forced people to condense their message, while Snapchat’s initial limitation on the temporal durability of other people’s posts encouraged people to more quickly consume the content presented. However, the design of these platforms has changed to acknowledge the fact that content created on social media persists and is searchable by others, even if the content creator does not want it to persist (boyd, 2008). Generally, teens of all demographics use social media in a similar manner, with an exception being that teens from lower-income

households used Facebook more often than teens from higher-income households (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Berriman and Thomson (2015, p. 588) provide a model of the “spectacles of intimacy” present in youths’ use of social media, with one dimension being the level of their participation and another dimension being the visibility of their participation, dividing youths into four different categories: the incompetent/victim, the fan/lurker, the geek, and the Internet celeb. The role of the incompetent/victim highlights one of the major consequences of social media use, especially for youths: the “impossibility of non-participation” (Berriman & Thomson, 2015, p. 590). The youth himself may not want to participate in social media either out of a lack of desire to do so or a desire to avoid negative consequences of social media use; however, others may assume that participatory role on his behalf. Incompetents are classified as those with low participation and high visibility in social media and are often subjected to cyberbullying, sexting, and other forms of exploitation.

The fan/lurker is an individual who maintains a cautious distance from social media. Their participation is low as well as their visibility, consuming significant amounts of online content without providing much of their own. However, their consumption and sharing of others’ content has value to others and can be commercialized for monetary value or for social value (Berriman & Thomson, 2015). There are some youths who join social media networks specifically for this opportunity to engage in “social voyeurism” (boyd, 2008, p. 122).

Geeks, according to Berriman and Thomson (2015), are youths with low participation and high visibility. They either create content in which they are not present (i.e. voiceovers) or create content under a false or ambiguous identity. These youths tailor their participation to establish a marketable online persona that could eventually become financially viable. These youths are aware of the risks of social media participation, and some choose to take those risks in pursuit of the aspiration toward commercial success.

The final category in Berriman and Thomson’s (2015) typology is the Internet celeb. These individuals have high participation and high visibility in the social media sphere. Many individuals have eschewed more traditional forms of celebrity (i.e. print models, broadcast television) in favor of using social media to distribute their content to a broad audience (i.e., Instagram models, YouTube stars, social media influencers). Becoming an Internet celeb is the aspiration of many youths in the geek category.

Violence and Social Media Unfortunately, youths are being exposed to violence and aggression both offline and online. While no community is immune to the effects of youth violence, urban neighborhoods are disproportionately affected (Polan, Sieving, & McMorris, 2013). Exposure to violence can have drastic consequences for youth. Within the school context, exposure to violence has been shown to affect in-school behavior (Patton, Woolley, & Hong, 2012). Violent victimization has been shown to be predictive of lowered academic performance (Hammig & Jozkowski, 2013).

According to Polan et al. (2013), violence results through a complex interaction of individual and environmental influences within a social ecology. Exposure to violence is often part of the ecological context for youths (Patton et al., 2012), as is the pervasiveness of social media (Patton et al., 2017). Somewhat cyclically, the social ecology of an urban neighborhood can then determine the nature of online interactions, whether they are violent or nonviolent, whether they are merely performances, or if they result in physical violence (Patton et al., 2017). Within the school context, social media can play a role in exposing youths to violence.

While acts of face-to-face violence are more common than online attacks (Patton et al., 2014; White et al., 2018), social media can play a role in violence in various ways. For example, disagreements (or beefs) can originate online and then get translated to face-to-face violence. One of Berriman and Thomson's (2015) interviewees mentioned that she avoids social media interactions due to the fact that school fights, both verbal and physical, are instigated through Facebook. Another example is the recording and online spread of violence. With smartphones being as commonplace as they are, in every type of school, it is easy for a student to see an act of violence being perpetrated, capture it on video, and post it for others to see. The consequences of this sometimes nonconsensual violence exposure are made even worse by the fact that these videos and images, once posted online, are often permanently available to peers and future employers (Patton et al., 2014).

Drama Social media is often used as a tool for expressing relational aggression. Relational aggression is “nonphysical aggression in which one manipulates or harms another’s social standing or reputation” (Leff, Wassdorff, & Crick, 2010, p. 509). While relational aggression is often associated with physical aggression, similar consequences can be seen solely through damage to reputation, whether or not there is ever a physical altercation. Marwick and boyd (2014, p. 1191) have described this phenomenon as drama, which is a “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media.” Using social media for drama takes what would have been a dyadic conflict and expands it to include others. This is often done intentionally by someone who is looking to recruit allies to their side of the conflict.

Social media also allows for drama, or other forms of conflict, to persist longer and reach more people than intended (boyd, 2008). As described by several of Marwick and boyd's (2014) interviewees, drama is seen as “fun or entertaining” (p. 1194). One could imagine the lurkers in a particular social media environment deriving some enjoyment from seeing others engaging in drama (Berriman & Thomson, 2015). Marwick and boyd (2014) distinguish drama from bullying in that bullying implies a power differential, where drama is largely bidirectional. The bully–victim dyad does not adequately take into account the role of peers and others on the margins of the conflict. Some youths invite drama into their social media experience through the “friending” of broader categories of youths in their class or school (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Drama that may have been limited to the classroom then can expand to other classrooms within the school and to other unintended invisible audiences (boyd, 2008).

Existing research has illustrated the use of the Internet and social media by adult and youth gangs for a number of purposes, including posturing, recruitment, and perpetuating violence. However, we do not know as well whether that same connection persists in more general samples of youth. This chapter asks whether the previously established link between gangs and social media is present in a sample of youth not limited to the gang-involved. We also examine more generally how these youths use social media, in particular whether social media is used for (1) perpetuating disagreements between individuals, (2) perpetuating drama, (3) bullying, or (4) posting videos of fights or violence online. Throughout the course of this chapter, we use Berriman and Thomson's (2015) typology of online participation to provide a framework for classifying and describing the social media usage of a sample of youths in a low-income, urban environment.

7.3 Methods

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger mixed methods study on school safety issues during the transition to high school. The first phase of the overall study was a survey of students in grades five through seven in the Flint Community School District (FCSD) in Michigan. Flint currently has a population just above 95,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), which is substantially less than its peak of over 195,000 in the 1960s. Demographically, 54% of the population is Black/African American and 40% is White/Caucasian. The median household income as of 2017 was \$26,330 and only 11.9% of the adult population (25 years and older) has a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). In total, 302 students participated in the survey across eight different schools, with an active consent rate of just over 45%.

Students who participated in the self-report survey were also eligible for inclusion in the three-wave in-depth interview if they were in the highest grade at their current school, and thus would transition to a new school the following year. Of the 302 that had active consent to participate in the survey, 93 students fit these criteria and were eligible for the qualitative portion of the study. Of these, 91 of the 93 students were interviewed in the first wave near the end of their last academic year of elementary school (spring 2016), just before their transition to a new school building the next year. Forty-seven of these students were female and 44 were male. The racial breakdown of the students is as follows: 49 black/African American, 19 mixed race (two or more races indicated), 14 white/Caucasian, 2 other, 1 Asian, 1 American Indian/Native American, 5 did not answer. The mean age of the students at Wave 1 was 11.73 years old. The second wave of interviews ($n = 64$) were conducted several weeks into the following school year (fall 2016), to give the participants some time to adjust to the new school environment. The third wave of interviews ($n = 63$) were conducted near the end of the students' first year in the new school building (spring 2017). The loss of students between waves 1 and 2 was related to students transferring out of the local school district. In FCSD, significant

decreases in the student population have led to the closing of multiple high schools in the preceding decade, leaving only one school for grades 7–12. The majority ($n = 46$) of study participants attended seventh grade in this building; remaining students attended school in one of several districts just outside of the school district in question.

Data for this study were collected from the semi-structured interviews. Across all three waves students were asked questions in the following areas: violence/safety at school, violence/safety of their peers at school, neighborhood violence/safety, neighborhood violence/safety of peers, and future goals/aspirations. Wave 1 included a section on expectations for the transition to a new school the following year. Students were asked what school they would like to go to, what school they are planning on going to, and any concerns about the transition. Wave 2 included a section on the immediate transition to their new school environment. An example question is “As a new student in this school, how are you treated by others?” Wave 3 also had questions about the transition to the new school and added a section on parents/family. Also during Wave 3, a specific question about gangs at school was added to the interview protocol. Students were directly asked “What kind of gang issues or problems occur in the school?” The average length of the Wave 1 interviews was 37 minutes 27 seconds with a median of 37 minutes. Wave 2 had a mean of 36 minutes 36 seconds with a median of 36 minutes 14 seconds and Wave 3 had a mean of 33 minutes 17 seconds with a median of 33 minutes 38 seconds.

After the interviews were transcribed, they were formatted into NVivo format for analysis. The first author broadly coded the data through keyword searches on terms such as “social media” and “gangs.” Further coding drew out additional themes that were discussed with the other authors of this chapter and other members of the research team, as described in the results section to follow. When data or coding discrepancies occurred, they were addressed by reviewing interview audio files and transcripts and any changes were made in consultation among the authors and other members of the research team.

7.4 Results

7.4.1 *Gang Activity*

Our first area of analysis was to look at signs of gang activity in the data. In the first two waves of interviews, gangs were mentioned spontaneously a total of 21 times, while in the third wave—in which the interview protocol explicitly included a question on gang presence—gangs were mentioned a total of 59 times. Across all three waves of interviews, the youth provided observations about gang activity in their schools and neighborhoods that can be grouped into three categories: familial involvement with gangs, perceptions of gang activity, and school efforts to address gang activity.

Familial Involvement with Gangs Youth in the study commonly had immediate or extended family members that were involved in gangs. Bruno² mentioned the role that family members can have in exposing children to the gang environment:

People who are in gang members [sic], they try to get their kids to do it, and everything else like ... it made me feel bad that like people are in that life and they could do better for themselves. Not only for themselves, but for their future kids and everything else.

Shauna connected familial involvement in gang activity to the need for metal detectors in her high school, saying that “the kids should know not to bring anything. It’s not some of the kids fault, because of how they were raised, and what they grew up into.” Though none of the youth personally experienced violence because of gang activity, several vicariously experienced gang violence through friends or family members. Tia detailed how gang violence impacted her family member:

My cousin died, a lot of people start gang banging ‘cause he was a Blood, and he didn’t like Crips. But his brother was a Crip. So his brother was a Crip, so his brother had to move out of the house cuz everyone in the house was Bloods, and then one day all you hear is that he got shot, ‘cause he was always gang banging.

Despite the violence of gangs, youth believed they also served a protective function. Personal or vicarious involvement in gangs left some youth feeling safe. In Wave 2, Shauna made this connection between gang members and her family: “[I]f they walk down the street, and we’re playing basketball, they’ll play basketball with us, they’ll be like, say hi to my mom and something like that.” In Wave 3, Shauna mentioned that she had a great-uncle and cousins who had been incarcerated and had been in gangs. When asked how this affected her, she responded, “I just go along with it, and I feel more protected...[b]ecause I know that they won’t let nobody hurt me.” Each of these youth recognized that familial involvement in gangs would likely lead them to experience gang activity, if only vicariously. For some, this involvement was detrimental to their lives; for others, it served a protective function.

Perceptions of Gang Activity The perception of gangs generally or how others perceived their involvement impacted several students. Diamond said:

I mean, I don’t wanna [be] like, “Oh that’s my street cred,” or whatever. I don’t want that ‘cause it’s stupid. Most people that do that say that they in gangs or whatever and it’s stupid. That’s just throwing your life away when somebody else could be having your life.

Claiming “street cred” as gang members do was deemed unimportant and not worthy of worry to Diamond. Shauna shared her negative perception of a high school in the city she did not attend, saying that “...I know a lot of kids there, and I feel like it’s a lot of gang-related kids that do things that they’re not supposed to at a certain age.” Shauna also notes that “they adapted to what the other kids was doing because they were either related to them, or they just hung around them.” Even though Shauna did not attend the school in question, she recognized that gang activity in the

²Note: all student names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

school can affect both students already gang-involved and those not initially gang-involved. Similarly, Hannah noted that some of her friends were becoming gang-involved and was worried that their lack of concern about gang activity would hurt them: "...if they do the wrong thing they probably gon' get shot or worse...[b]ecause they think it's a game. They don't really know what's out there, they don't know the people out there." These students illustrate the impact that mere perceptions of gang activity can have on themselves and their fellow classmates. While some are worried, others are not. Those that are not worried could become involved to the point of experiencing gang violence.

School Efforts to Address Gang Activity Youth had much to say regarding what their school either was doing or should be doing to address gang activity. Two students felt that their school was simply too big to properly address gang activity. Kevin said it's necessary to "lower the limit of kids. That's how a lot of things happen. If you have so many kids bunched up in one school, you can't tell what's happening." Similarly, Katelyn said: "There's a lot more teachers and a lot more students, so it's hard because there's a lot of fights. You say one thing and they'll have like their gang blast your junk." Multiple students referenced that their school banned students from wearing bandanas, as they were perceived by school officials as being connected to gang activity. As an example, David asserted that "[t]he principal, she took all bandanas out of the school. Nobody can wear bandanas because she thought they was gang banging. You know how if you wear a blood bandana it's like blood? That's what she thought." Kia seemed less convinced of this link:

I don't really think there are any gang issues but our principal told us that we're not supposed to wear bandanas or headbands because some people wear them. I think they might just wear them just because they might not have any headbands or anything to cover their edges with.

The school is not immune from gang activity. For some students, they either recognize that their school is making some effort to curtail gang activity, as was the case with the principal's efforts to remove bandanas, or they feel that the school could do more, as mentioned by Kevin in regard to the crowded school building being a contributor to gang fights. For others like Kia, the school's efforts were unnecessary because they felt gangs were not a problem in their school.

7.4.2 *Gangs and Social Media*

Given these mentions of gang activity both in the students' neighborhoods and in their schools, as well as the previously described research on gangs using social media (e.g. Moule et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2017), we expected to see some connection between mentions of gangs in our data and the use of social media. However, only two students in Wave 3 made any connection between gang activity and social media. Alexis heard about one particular gang's activity through Facebook:

“Because I hear them talking about it. They wear shirts. They go to Facebook about it and they just go on and on about how they disrespected the gang or something.” In her discussion of the same gang, Diamond said a gang will “put their name on it. That’s how they do it on Facebook. You want to do that, that’s fine. But I ain’t getting shot up for nobody.” This connection was not the subject of any direct questions from the interviewers; the connection was made by the students. While others studies have made the link between gangs and social media, this did not emerge in our data as a dominant theme, suggesting that any online gang activity is not very remarkable for the students, even though many perceived gangs to be present in their schools.

7.4.3 *Youth and Social Media*

Nevertheless, in our examination of social media use among youth, we identified four themes: (1) disagreements, or “beef,” either starting on social media or with social media as the primary escalator; (2) drama; (3) bullying; and (4) kids posting videos of fights on social media.

Beef “Beef” is a colloquial term used to mean some form of disagreement between people or groups or the polarization of the relationship between two groups (Sullivan, 2005). For most of these conflicts, beefs would start on social media and then potentially progress to the real world. For example, Hunter observed that people “usually say something bad about other people, and then at school the next day, they’d argue or more.” Likewise, Alexis detailed the effect of a disagreement that started through social media: “This boy he came up to one of my friends and just started yelling at her and cussing her out because he got mad over nothing...Over something that happened on social media.” James talked about how some students beef online purposely because of the ability to hide their identity:

Because it’s a lot of people that like to talk but don’t say it. Like they don’t want people to know that they said it so they do it on the Internet. They just keep talkin, talkin, talkin, then end up you know wrong person.

These referenced students would be classified as geeks; they are actively participating in an online disagreement while using the Internet to hide their identity. They want the ability to talk about others without having to face them directly. Directionality of the conflict can sometimes be muddled to where it is hard to tell where the conflict originated, as illustrated by DeShawn: “Yeah. It is. They’re really...Most of the time the fights lead to stuff that’s on Facebook and stuff and they were talking about it at school, then it happened.”

Several students described how families were involved in these beefs. As an example, Coriena said “[t]hey was on social media talking. My sister posted a picture and then she was just talking about my sister from there. Then she was talking about dead members in my family.” Youth in our study recognized the potential of

social media to be a venue for beefs or a partial cause of those beefs. In some cases, the beef would start online and then move to the real world. For example, one of Kiara's friends got into an argument over sexuality that started online and moved to the real world: "So they went outside and my best friend was like, 'So you steady talking all that stuff on Facebook and you always saying this or that.' Or whatever, and the girl's like, 'Okay, just shut up and run up.' So they ended up fighting." In others, the beef would primarily occur online. This happened to a friend of Hunter who explained: "[T]hey were playing online. They said they will get the FBI at their house if they don't tell that person where they live." The person beefing with Hunter's friend may have been threatening "swatting," where one person will falsely get law enforcement to respond to their online rival's house, claiming a crime has occurred (Binder, 2018). Even though this friend ended up telling their parents about the threat, the interaction between the two youths occurred entirely online.

Drama Wave 3 brought discussion by several students on drama and social media. Taylor defines drama as individuals who "[s]tart situations, startin' stuff that doesn't belong to you. Saying stuff that you didn't have to say." For Taylor, those who want drama on social media act as lurkers: They post it on social media so that others can see it and like it without themselves being involved. Tia is aware of the consequences of drama online:

A lot of people here get ran out of this school because over some drama, like, you could start beef with that one person but they'll take it to the Internet, and then it reflects on a lot of people not liking you no more, and then you lose your friends....[For example] people screenshot it and repost it. And then a lot of people screenshot that person and repost, repost and then it's in everybody's Snapchat story."

Several other students described dramatic encounters online. Jada complained about an incident she had with another girl, stating: "She shouldn't have said she was gonna spit in my face, and that's what took me above my line. You shouldn't say you gonna spit in my face. I want you to know I don't want that to happen." Consistent with prior studies, our study shows that drama can take place in front of an audience often bigger than intended, and it can have consequences beyond those anticipated by the participants (Marwick & boyd, 2014).

Bullying Bullying online was a common theme in our study, though the results of our study suggests not all students agree with how impactful this form of victimization is on others. For Tia, bullying online was performative in that those bullying over social media "do it just to get a laugh out of it, to make other people believe what they want to believe." That said, bullying at their current school led a few students to lose their desire to learn. Of her old school, Tia described: "We never had stuff like this, like bullying and social media because we wanted to learn." Social media, at times, was connected to bullying and fighting. When asked why people should stay off social media, Raven responded because of "cyber bullying." However, not everyone thought there was a connection between bullying and social media. Jasmine claimed that disputes "usually just happens in person, verbally." And Jack stated: "I don't think of anything online 'cause I don't have a phone or

anything, or any social media sites. So I don't think of-...No, I'm not trying to avoid it, I just haven't gotten one yet." Jack fits most closely to the category of the incompetent, though he would not phrase it in terms of being a victim (Marwick & boyd, 2014). He takes care to mention that the primary reason he does not participate is due to not having a phone until he reaches the age of 13. Bullying online was entertainment for some students (Marwick & boyd, 2014) and impacted the academic performance of others (Patton et al., 2012), but for several others bullying online did not impact their lives at all.

Posting Fights Online Extant literature shows that social media use is often performative, consisting of a demonstration of feelings and conflict that may or may not occur in the real world (Lauger & Densley, 2018; Patton et al., 2013; Vanden Abeele, Van Cleemput, & Vandebosch, 2017). The use of a mobile device in this context confirms the performative aspect of antisocial behavior. Thus, it was not uncommon for some students to use social media to post videos of fights. According to Chloe:

They just seeing who won the fight when they replay the video. If they bet other people on who won the fight then they can say "I told you they was going to win the fight" or something like that.

This use of fight videos is performative in that the students are claiming knowledge of who among their peers can win fights. Jayla mentioned that some students like to post fights "to get attention" from other kids and "other people like followers and stuff." Additionally, fight videos can also be used for entertainment. Martin claimed that people record fights "to enjoy it! Cause everybody love a good fight." Such comments fit into Berriman and Thomson's (2015) category of geeks who aspire to become Internet celebs; they post video of fights in which they are only a bystander, attempting to gain attention themselves. Recording fights can get a person both positive and negative attention, as noted by Martin:

They be havin a fight and they happen to pull out their phone. Cause that what everybody do, when they know a fight's gonna happen, everybody pull out they phone...Cause if ... they see you not pulling out your phone they gonna be like, oh you ain't got no phone, you got a minute phone, all that.

Nevertheless, several students expressed being tired of people recording and posting fights on social media. Jamal asserted:

I don't know. It's pointless. It's really pointless to do that...I've seen a lot. I just, I deleted my social media because I said that's just retarded and if I get on there, then they just started just doing stuff about me. Because if that was me then I be feeling bad, so I just deleted my social media.

Yet, a couple of students expressed a desire to witness fights online. Jada stated that one girl "claim[ed] that she can fight. But I got a whole video of her fighting in this hallway over here." When asked if the girl gets into a lot of fights, she responded "No 'cause she never can back up the words that she be talking." And Sydney explained a fight that she was in: "When the security was there, I was still fighting

because you're not going to get no last hit when you got the first hit." Even though the security guards were trying to break up the fight, she continued in order to maintain her reputation among everyone who was watching and recording the fight. Asked her thoughts on seeing her fight on social media, she responded "I didn't care." Overall, posting fights on social media was a common occurrence for the youths. Doing so was both for entertainment purposes and for performative reasons, to provide a "tough front" (Anderson, 1999).

7.5 Discussion

Highly organized gangs use the Internet to post videos and recruit new members, though the level of organization is not related to how they organize online (Moule et al., 2014). Drawing on a more mythic conceptualization of violence (Decker, 1996), gangs use social media to report their participation in and desire to commit violent acts, even if that reported conduct is exaggerated or false (Patton et al., 2013). This also ties into the performative use of social media by gangs and gang members, allowing gangs and gang members to achieve more symbolic goals such as making others aware of their willingness to fight, whether or not any physical fight actually takes place (Moule et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2017).

Patton et al. (2013) suggested there was a lack of research attention on gang members' use of social media. Since that time, several studies have examined this issue in more detail by targeting gangs and gang members for study (i.e., Lauger & Densley, 2018; Moule et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2017; Storrod & Densley, 2017; Stuart, 2019). What is unclear from this literature is whether the presence of gangs and gang members on social media impacts youth more broadly or whether it is meaningful in the context of adolescent conflicts more widely. To this end, the current study examined the role of social media and the Internet in student conflicts, including the importance of gangs in producing or shaping this conflict among a sample of students from Flint, Michigan. In our data, the connection between gangs and social media as an important driver of youth conflict was simply not there. Only two students in Wave 3 made any explicit connection between gangs and social media; each of those students only mentioned hearing about one gang's activity, without mentioning any of the other functions that prior research suggests for gangs and social media. There are several reasons why the connection between social media and gang activity was not present in our study. As previously mentioned, the interview guide for Waves 1 and 2 did not specifically mention gangs. The interview guide for Wave 3 did contain a question on gang problems in the school, but many students either said there were no gang problems in the school, or they did not directly answer the question. Another reason why gangs did not appear in our sample of students may be related to the age of the students. Students in Wave 1 were still in elementary school, while students in Wave 2 had just started as seventh graders in FCSD or a near by school district. The only mentions of gangs in Wave 1 were in the neighborhood context and not in school. Students in Wave 1 and Wave 2 had

not yet experienced the influential power of gang- or violence-involved peers in the concentrated school context (Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016; Vanden Abeele et al., 2017). While many youths across the country have access to a smartphone (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), it is also plausible that the students in our sample may not have had the same access to social media and communication technology as other students of similar age. We did not specifically ask about whether the student owned or had access to a smartphone. According to Anderson and Kumar (2019), possession of smartphones and access to broadband Internet have increased across all income levels, though those in lower-income households still have lower levels of technology adoption than those in middle- and upper-income households. However, this latter reason may not seem as plausible in the face of the high prevalence of other social media use by students in our study. Overall, gang activity on social media in our sample may simply not have been as remarkable or visible for the youths in our study. Future research should use larger samples of students and more direct questions on gang activity on social media to more definitively assess whether such activity is not visible or is not there at all.

We explained how students in our study used social media through Berriman and Thomson's (2015) four-part typology of online participation: the incompetent/victim, the fan/lurker, the geek, and the Internet celeb. Throughout all three waves of interviews, we found examples of each of the first three categories. Several of the youth, who either fit themselves or described someone who fit as an incompetent, described how a lack of Internet savvy left them vulnerable to victimization or exploitation. For several of these youth, they did not use victim-based language to describe their lack of social media presence; they either were not allowed to have a social media presence or chose not to participate. Most of the youth in our study fit into the categories of fan/lurker and the geek. Each of these categories involves lower visibility online, but with differing levels of participation. Those in the geek category may have their own YouTube channel or post videos online, but they lack the following necessary to be an Internet celeb. Other youth in our study maintain a more cautious presence online and do more observation of others' content. They can use what others have created for their own social benefit.

In our study, there appeared to be four ways in which social media served to expose the students to violence or conflict: beefs, drama, posting videos of fights, and bullying. Beef, or disagreements, often began on social media. One student would make a comment about the way someone else was dressed, the people with whom someone else would hang out, or in one example, someone's sexual orientation would be questioned. In some cases, this beef would then escalate into a physical fight. However, this was not always the case; some beefs started in person and were continued on social media. Drama emerged in Wave 3 as an alternative form of conflict. Conflicts between two students that could have been resolved more simply were then expanded to include others. Posting videos of fellow students fighting online was another way that they were exposed to violence, even without participating themselves. Our results are consistent with Vanden Abeele et al.'s (2017) study finding that using a phone emphasizes the performative aspect of antisocial behavior. These fights recorded by smartphone provided "irrefutable proof" of the

willingness of some youths in our study to fight and portray a tougher image (Vanden Abeele et al., 2017, p. 72).

The final type of exposure to violence through social media in our study was bullying. The few mentions of bullying in our study focused on the academic implications and the performative aspects of bullying. Recall that Tia mentioned that the high school environment caused her and some students to lose their desire to learn, replacing that desire with bullying and social media. Other students commented on the fact that their teachers did not seem to care about bullying, further deteriorating the connection between the school and bullying. This comports with the literature that says that exposure to violence can impact students' academic achievement (Hammig & Jozkowski, 2013; Patton et al., 2012; Polan et al., 2013). Youths can use social media as a medium for these nonphysical bullying behaviors to take place (Leff et al., 2010). According to Berriman and Thomson's (2015) typology, those being bullied, whether face to face or online, would be considered incompetents. However, most of the violent social media usage by youth in our study fell outside of the bully–victim dyad (Marwick & Boyd, 2014) and was tied either to beefs, drama, or posting fight videos.

Our study is not without limitations. The first limitation is the content of our interview guides for each wave of interviews. We specifically asked about gang activity in Wave 3, but we did not ask any questions on gangs in either of the first two waves. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for the interviewer and youth to discuss gangs in Waves 1 and 2 if initiated by the student. Some mention of gangs in all three waves of interviews would have led to better data on the topic by triggering the students to think about experiences they may have had and connect them to gang activity. Second, even though the literature shows that, overall, the vast majority of youth own or have access to a smartphone (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), we did not ask the students about their access to either a computer at home or a smartphone, as social media was not a primary focus of the larger study. Future studies should deliberately include specific questions about social media usage, given its prevalence in our study and in the literature. A third limitation of our study is that it was only conducted in one urban environment with a limited sample size, impacting generalizability. Ideally, future studies would use similar interview protocols as our study—adding direct questions on gangs in all waves—with a sample that includes youths in different socioeconomic and racial environments; it is plausible that the observations made by students in our study would differ than those made in other environments.

In conclusion, our study contributes to the growing literature on youths' use of social media, especially as related to violence and exposure to violence. While we did not find the same connections between social media use and gang activity as in other studies, we did find connections between social media use and aggressive acts such as posting fight videos, beefs, drama, and bullying. These categories of violence exposure through social media, as well as Berriman and Thomson's (2015) typology, can both be extended to the analysis of gang use of social media. Our study shows that, in our sample of youths, social media is used to discuss gang activity as well as various types of violence exposure, even if the connection between

gangs and social media is not explicit. Gang use of social media can be considered a subset of a broader use of social media; while gang members may use social media for demonstrating a propensity toward violence, those who are not gang-involved may use social media in a similar manner.

The information we have presented could be used to increase awareness of these issues for policymakers and school administrators. These students are often not forthcoming to those in positions of authority; our study provides information that they might like to know as to what their students are doing through social media. Care must be taken, though, to involve the students in these policy discussions without marginalizing them (Hope, 2015). Students of this age are aware of the consequences of their social media use and can make decisions on how best to use it.

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Chapter 8

Leaving Gangs – Failed Brotherhood and Reconstructed Masculinities



Torbjörn Forkby, Jari Kuosmanen, and Henrik Örnlin

8.1 Introduction

The hope of finding a community, a brotherhood, is a key reason for why one joins a gang, together with the expectations of personal achievement, respect, protection, and success (Klein & Maxson, 2010; Melde, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2009). With a few exceptions, most gang members will not see these expectations come true, but still gangs continue to attract new members who have many of the same dreams, hopes, and expectations that previous generations articulated. In order to survive and prosper, gangs are very dependent on how they are seen and perceived, not just on their actual success. Gangs could in this respect be regarded as myth-producing units, whose external communication is crucial to their self-presentation (Hagedorn, 1994). Their reputation for toughness, strength, and success is essential for them to establish and maintain a market position and recruit new members. Some of the myths that we deal with in this text refer to the gang as an arena for articulating masculinity, brotherhood, strength, fearlessness, adventure, and entrepreneurial activity. Primarily, the focus is on the reactions from members experiencing those myths to be false, hindering other life expectations and their strategies when they want to get out of the gang.

We will use modern research on masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) to indicate how these desires and intentions make gangs attractive for some males, and we will outline the central mechanisms that, over time, make life as a gang member hard to cope with. As we will show in this chapter, exiting a gang requires

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a redirection of one's life, including a reorganization of one's life contingences, and a restructuring of (gender) identity. All of this occurs as an interplay between the individual and the surrounding environment, in which the individual's will and intentions function both as driving forces and as outcomes (Berger, Abu-Raiya, Heineberg, & Zimbardo, 2017; Roman, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2017; Weaver, 2012).

Before further expounding on the themes of the article, we will make a brief presentation on Swedish gangs, in terms of their types and estimated numbers.

8.2 Gangs in Sweden

The history of Swedish gangs is long, perhaps dating as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, when "gang boys" were heavily discussed. This debate contributed to the formation of the first child protection laws that were enacted in 1902 (Ohlsson & Swärd, 1994). However, a more recent starting point, which provides many of the ingredients of the current discussion, was in the early 1990s. At that time, two biker clubs in southern Sweden applied for membership, one of the international associations of the Hells Angels and the other of Bandidos, and soon a "gang war" began among the contracting parties. This so-called biker war expanded from disputes already established on a personal level and between previous groups in Sweden and Denmark. Thus, the revived gang issue in Sweden was perceived at first as a transformation within some biker communities, but this changed dramatically a few years later when new formations entered the scene. These groups came together not through a declared interest in motorcycles, but through sharing a common background (i.e., growing up in the same neighborhood, going to the same schools, and hanging out at certain places). Some associations were also connected through family bonds (Rostami, Leinfelt, & Holgersson, 2012).

At the time of writing, there are an estimated 12,600 people involved in "organized crime" in Sweden, including gang members (Rostami et al., 2018). This number should be treated with caution, however, because it is based on police registers of known suspects involved in organized crime, and probably contains both over- and under-estimation of different groups. The police data contained information regarding belongingness to a specific criminal constellation (name of group) or was more general, for example, concerning a biker gang, type of crime, territorial association, and networks. The approximately 12,600 persons in the "organized crime" category were then divided into five subgroups according to principles of criminal organization (Rostami, Mondani, Liljeros, & Edling, 2017). About 5100 individuals were defined as network-associated; 700 belonging to partial organizations, meaning they had longer periods of documented criminality in different constellations but were not formally organized. Street gangs consisted of 800 individuals with explicit insignia and had a territorial group link; biker gangs involved 5700 members, and mafia organizations (with a capacity to affect political, cultural, and economic structures) had about 500 persons. Across the groups, 90–95% of the members were male with a lower educational background, and, except for the biker

gangs, the proportion of individuals with a foreign background was much lower than average in the population.

This picture leads us to the issues of this chapter. If gangs are more attractive for men, what do they find, and what social environment is sought in these settings? Additionally, if they can serve as arenas for the projection of men's hopes and dreams, how do the gang organizations succeed in satisfying these, and why then do members find reasons for leaving them? Lastly, if gangs serve as arenas for expressions of masculinity, do transformations of the male identity occur when exiting gangs and, if so, what kind of transformations? We will try to answer these questions, some in more detail than others, but first we will introduce the theoretical framework.

8.3 Gangs as Arenas for Homosocial Masculinity and Brotherhood

Connell's (1987, 2005) theoretical model on hegemonic masculinity is a central reference to modern masculinity research. The male hegemony, in part, refers to the patriarchal power men have over women as well as a strong hierarchy among men. Rankings are based on what is considered valuable and what constitutes the norm, including factors both internal and external to gender order. The former is about superordinate and subordinate relationships and involves men's physical superiority and actions, based on among other things sexuality, sexual orientation, physical functionality, and age. In order to achieve a hegemonic male position in the community these internal factors must be supported by external hierarchies giving institutional power, such as class, social group, and ethnicity (which is described as "race" in certain countries). High position in the structure valuing hegemonic masculinity is thus gained through the access to a combination of both internal and external gender capital, where those fulfilling the acquirements are authorized and the others face the risk of marginalization. The latter groups are left to accept their marginalized role, protest, and find alternative value systems, or to find ways to compensate for a sense of having their masculinity threatened (for some within a gang).

In later theory development, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) placed a great emphasis on context in the construction of various hegemonic masculinities, including on national, regional, and local levels. The creation of masculinities is not only done on the basis of general ideal images of hegemonic masculinities, but in a complex and reciprocal interaction between different groups of men, where even men who in some contexts may have a subordinate role can contribute to elements in the creation of a desirable masculinity (Demetriou, 2001). Living in a situation with strongly regulated gender scripts can also be perceived as restrictive in what it might entail to be a man (or a woman). There is a potential "intra-categorical" complexity that arises when confronted with other possible forms of expression (McCall, 2005).

Historically, one can note that associations based on class, occupation, and interest have been more of a rule than an exception. The male homosocial group still consists of a distinct power bastion, whether it involves well-to-do men in male-dominated associations such as the Rotary Club (Hamrén, 2007), disorganized groups of male friends in the local neighborhood, or those in more organized motorcycle clubs (Grundvall, 2005). In these contexts, men create an important collective basis and center of power in order to work toward conquering material and symbolic resources in relation to women as well as men who are not a part of the group. In addition to the power aspect, it is important to note in this context that the search for these male communities is about more than just the desire for power. A desire for belonging and security as well as social and emotional community in “brotherhood” with other men in similar situations are also essential driving forces (Grundvall, 2005; Hammarén & Johansson, 2014; Kuosmanen, 2001).

The ideal masculine identity in a gang context is strongly associated with values such as toughness, courage, and having control over different situations (Garot, 2015; Luyt & Foster, 2001). Bourdieu (1999) argued that behind this audacity there might be a fear of being perceived as a “weakling, sissy or fag.” However, instead of admiration, appreciation, and honor, which is the goal associated with a display of courage, these actions always involve the risk of being shamed if you fail (Moran, 2014; Scheff, 1997). The fear of being shamed and falling short means that peers are an equally important part of the construction of masculinities. The comparison between men could result in frustration arising from not being able to achieve the hegemonic male positions considered as desirable (Ekenstam, 1998; Kimmel, 2017; Liliequist, 1999). The leap from the form of hypermasculinity that expresses itself through the gang to functioning in “normal” society might be particularly large in a society such as Sweden, which has very much embraced an ideology of gender equality. Thus, the hegemonic masculinity in Sweden’s institutional power base has incorporated a way of thinking that breaks the traditional ideals, in particular with its more pronounced expressions (Hearn et al., 2012).

8.4 Common Notions in Gang Masculinities

Studies from different parts of the world that explicitly discuss the role of masculinity in gangs indicate similar results regarding what form it takes and what needs it stems from. For example, Davies (1998) has studied homosocial groups in Manchester and Salford in the Victorian era and noted that conflicts between male groups were common. The most violent groups were in the most marginalized parts of the city. By virtue of gang affiliation, the men could make some sort of livelihood and turn their feelings of inferiority into a kind of mastery of life. Even in these early gangs, masculinity was linked to concepts such as glory, reputation, hardness, and toughness. Even in the contemporary UK, in Glasgow, where traditional industries and working-class occupations have seen a significant decline over the years, the street has become an increasingly important male arena for those who have been

marginalized in this process. It is mainly by fighting that these men have managed to create a name and reputation for themselves, something that they also benefit from in gang settings (McLean & Holligan, 2018).

Lorigan, Snell, and Robertson (2016) discussed the construction of masculinity in a motorcycle group in New Zealand, which was inspired by the white power ideology. The authors argued that the creation of a compensatory and excessive masculinity (i.e., “hypermasculinity”) is done through rites of passage that are linked to violence and intimidation, as well as through belittling women. Issues concerning race/ethnicity, class, and gangs are salient in all countries where immigration has been a factor and the class issue has therefore also become highly “ethnified.” Payne (2006), for example, examined African-American men and their masculinity in the context of a difficult socioeconomic situation. Becoming “The King” of the street was required of a man in order for him to support his family and earn respect. Payne (2006) argued that any intervention that is aimed at helping men in such contexts get away from gangs must recognize the importance and content of his masculine identity.

Ureno (2004) interviewed both African-American and Puerto Rican men that were part of various gangs (Bloods, Crips, Zulu Nation, Latin Kings, Netas, and La Familia). In ways that are similar to other studies, the author argued that the gangs and the special masculinity that they develop arise from a problematic and hostile living situation that consists of troubled families and significant socioeconomic marginalization. Through violence and crime, men created power and control and an opportunity to support themselves. The gangs served as a surrogate family where they were able to gain security, understanding, and respect, but wherein also learned structure and rules. By creating a hard, masculine shell, they were able to overcome prior feelings of helplessness and shame. The problem, however, was that in this process they had to suppress softer emotions (e.g., fear, empathy) that were important in relationships with others, including family members.

In very poor areas with long traditions of gangs, these male associations have a specific character. Baird (2012) noted in his investigation in the city of Medellin in Colombia that membership in a gang was perceived as a relatively accepted way of creating a livelihood and a life. Success in this arena was based on the strategic use of violence, and the ones who were most skilled at it, the evilest, “más malos,” were often the leaders. The softer parts of their masculinity were expressed in the social community and the camaraderie of the gang, but also in relation to family and children, who were also important to the men. Luyt and Foster (2001) studied the importance of social context and relationships among gang members amid students at two secondary schools in Cape Town, South Africa, and they touched on a similar question. In a survey, the authors measured attitudes to commonly held beliefs about masculinity: toughness, success, and control. The results showed that students in areas with a lot of gang activity had more positive attitudes toward these concepts in comparison to students who lived in wealthier parts of the city. Carson, Wiley, and Esbensen (2017) demonstrated that gang guys distinguished themselves from others through a relatively weak connection to school, being more violent, as well as having fewer than average prosocial relationships.

Based on this literature, it appears that the gang could provide an arena for some men to compensate for shortcomings experienced in other life spheres, and in this way rescue a sense of gendered self-worth. These types of compensatory strategies and processes, which we call compensatory masculinity, are common to men in general (Kuosmanen, 2001) and in marginalized populations in particular. We also believe that the concept of compensatory masculinity expresses the understanding of the fact that masculinities are constructed in a complex and ongoing process that lasts a lifetime. While frequently recurring terms in gang research such as “protest masculinity,” “machismo,” and “hypermasculinity” have strong negative connotations and are more an expression of a relatively rigid masculinity and inner identity, our study has found that these expressions of masculinity are more fluid and could be seen as a rational response to the demands of gang life and could be challenged and changed when leaving this life.

8.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The data comes from a 3-year-long study on exit processes from gangs funded by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The research project includes 20 interviews with individuals that have exited from gangs/criminality, and 41 with employees of various agencies (public and NGOs) concerned with different parts of the exit process. In this chapter, the main analysis comes from the interviews with the 20 former gang members. Four of these had been engaged in long-term criminality in different associations and groups, and 16 had been members of biker, street gangs, prison gangs, or mafia structures. Those in the two later groups would have also experienced membership in either biker or street gangs, and generally many had been members of different gang constellations. When interviewed they were somewhere in the age span from the early 20s to upper 40s, with most about 30 years old. Most had started their criminal career in their early teens and had been active in gangs and criminality for several years.

The interviews took place at different locations: at a room at a university, a restaurant, in someone’s home, and at a prison. To get in contact with the interviewees, we were dependent on gatekeepers such as prison employees, parole officers, social workers in support–exit services (public or NGO), and police officers. The interviews lasted from about 40 minutes to 2.5 hours with an average of approximately 2 hours. A life-story interview method was used, meaning that we encouraged longer and reflective narratives, focusing broadly on their early years and family history, going through pre-gang/criminality history, associations with groups, life in those groups, and exiting. We facilitated the interview by giving it a general structure, and asking for more in-depth reflections if needed. In the data analysis we used reconstruction of the narratives to look for how the life history evolved, what phases and turning points could be seen as important, and the individual’s own meaning-making and identity formation during different periods. We also analyzed the data thematically using the computer-assisted (or aided) qualitative data analysis

software (CAQDAS) NVivo. In this we coded the data according to themes and concepts that had been partly decided before the analysis started, and partly constructed during the analysis. The interviews and themes were discussed iteratively within the research group and developed successively. The quotes have been translated from Swedish into English and slightly edited to enhance the understanding, for example by clarifying the intentional meaning of particular passages, and correcting common grammatical errors that occur in conversation but impair comprehension in text form.

8.6 Dreams of Respect and Brotherhood Versus Reality

A recurring theme throughout the interviews we conducted with previous gang members is that the gang has an essential role in compensating for shortcomings in family life, school, and society by allowing the members to *be someone* and to *feel a sense of belonging* with other men in similar situations. Thus, similar to what Turner (1975) has discussed as “communitas,” the belonging to a group came with a hope of deep friendship, a sense of belonging to a group that you could rely on, with people who would be there for you regardless of the circumstances. In other words, there was the hope of brotherhood.

IP: We had the mentality that [claps hands] that we were going to go for it. We were going to do our thing. Whatever happens along the way will happen, that’s all we knew for sure.

I: So this peer group itself was the most important?

IP: Yes, yes.

I: It was more important than your own family, at home?

IP: It was more important than anything.

I: Anything, yes. Why did...so, how can you explain that it turned out this way?

IP: Because we were those five people from the beginning, and we were... I called their mum “mum;” and they called my mum “mum” [referring to that each other’s mothers were called just mum of everyone in the group, like a big family, author’s note]

I: But it was also like...sometimes you talk about very strong friendship. Was it at that level, that it was very strong?

IP: Yes, of course, it was 24 hours a day. Like, no matter what. We had that mentality, that was how we saw it. It is still like that today, all of the friends that I had back then and which I still have today, they stick together – 100%, still to this day. I’m with them in their heart and mind, but not with physically because I have chosen to walk away from it. I will never want to go back to it. That is something I have decided, and everyone has respected that. But that doesn’t mean that I’ll turn my back on them, I will never. If I meet any of them out there, I will never say “I don’t know you,” absolutely not. It is a friendship that cannot be broken. But it can also be limited.

The quote comes from a person who, according to his own admission, had been a leader in one of the most well-known and dominant groupings in a large city. Here you can find several of the dimensions that were recurrently mentioned by those involved in the emergence of neighborhood groups. There were original friendships, they knew each other’s families, almost so intimately that they were parts of the same family (e.g., called “my mum ‘mum’ and vice versa”). In the peer group they

developed ideas about what they could accomplish if they stuck together. They would “keep going” and handle the obstacles that arose afterwards. There are also core ideals that are common regardless of the type of group: To be there for each other at any time, at all hours of the day, and to put the group ahead of everything else. In this group it is also easy to understand the gang as just a homosocial group. They were just men, the group had to come before anything else, the goal was to be successful at any cost, and your own mental and physical strength as well as that of the group was emphasized.

The subject also mentions in the interview that they had no rules in the group that prevented dropouts. Dropping out does not necessarily need to be regarded as a betrayal. The only rule was that you were not permitted to join another group, because you do not do that to your friends – you do not betray your brothers. Instead, a defection from the group very much depended on whether it was regarded as a threat to the group’s core values and/or activities. That could be the case, for example, if someone possessed information about the group activities that could be harmful, or if he had not invested as much energy as required. Everything is combined into an evaluation of whether the group perceives the motives for disengagement as legitimate.

A recurring theme when we analyzed the interviews was also the double-sided nature of the gang’s function and ideology. There were both stabilizing and destabilizing forces in the very basic organization of the gang, which means that the gangs are basically organizations filled with tensions and contradictions that must be dealt with. First of all, note from the quote that the realization of the group’s ambitions would entail a struggle against different obstacles.

The hope of a brotherhood connotes ideas about collective creation of community, reciprocity, and self-monitoring. However, while the dream of brotherhood is real within the gang, that realization is counteracted by forces and conditions central to the gang’s existence, including an internal hierarchy, external threats, and burning out due to “unfair working conditions.” Being there for the common goal of the gang can mean that protections afforded to those in the regular job market are set aside for the benefit of the group. Such expectations can turn into exploitation. Thus, while gang life provides the hope of community, it also presents an ongoing struggle against real and potential enemies and obstacles. The quote also describes something that many people have touched upon: Membership in this internal community also entails external exclusion. This also means (potential) conflicts with other social contexts. Thirdly, loyalty to the group is not limited in time or space, but must apply as the primary organizing principle 24 hours a day. To be on duty 24 hours a day entails a high degree of stress, as the possibility of enjoying relaxation and recreation is limited. Fourthly, this increasing of the group’s significance entails a definite division between the gang and other people, who are regarded as outsiders in relation to the central sense of belonging. This means a static relation to time and life changes, which could result in conflicts if other people outside of the gang (e.g., girlfriends and children) and contexts become important to a person, so-called “linked lives” (Elder, 1994). For example, a girlfriend disagreeing with what gang membership implies could be a threat, and the question of whose loyalty is the

most important arises. Generally, the gang could not accept girlfriends, meaning presumably short-term relations, coming between the member and the gang. However, sometimes demands of marriage or responsibility over one's own children could be accepted, since they represented commitments on a deeper level.

The search for belonging is not something that is instantly realized in all groups. Those involved in forming a group from the very start are to a higher degree also owners of the concept and can enjoy full belonging while the group is being formed. For others, belonging to a group is something that is earned over time, as it is encapsulated in layers of qualification mechanisms. An individual must be tried and proved worthy in order to enjoy the warmth of belonging, and this is only granted to those who have been socialized into the group and have accepted its values, rules, and hierarchy. In this setting, belonging becomes a form of reward that is received after a considerable period of hard work.

You are a slave for approximately 2 years, during which you must be available 24 hours a day. The member who then takes you in and gives you this trial period, everything he wants, everything he says and stuff, come here, sit there, wait there, do that, and it takes precedence over your children, your family, everything. To me it isn't brotherhood, and then after 2 years' time when he has proved himself sufficiently loyal, or as I said, has put in enough grunt work, then all of a sudden, he'll be on the same level as the person who...the people who have exposed him to these things. I have a hard time seeing that it's working.

Having qualification mechanisms can be viewed as fair in order to prevent candidates (hang-arounds, prospects) from being allowed to enter the central control functions of a group. Given the investment in time, knowledge, reputation, and financial resources it might have taken to establish the organization, it is risky to give new people power over it too quickly. Control mechanisms against potentially nonfunctioning members might therefore be needed in order to protect the organization. At the same time, a conditional, and also internally exclusive, sense of belonging is reproduced, where people who have reached higher levels of the hierarchy might want to be compensated for the years of hard work that they have put in. The brotherhood ideal includes dimensions that may be difficult to fulfill over time, and when this ideal is realized in a hierarchical organization, where people on a lower level in the organization need to perform the less prestigious tasks, that context, as opposed to an ideal brotherhood, entails a belonging that is built on exclusion and exploitation.

The desire for close and compensatory relationships, such as being there for each other without any demands for immediate reciprocity, resembles ideas of how family units are believed to work or even utopian ideas of close-knit communities (Lyon, 1984). Systems of this nature, where one person's worth is acknowledged without the need to encroach on that of others, might be described as being based more on a type of solidarity and care logic (Gilligan, 1993).

While gangs are said to offer a forum for brotherhood, we found several examples to suggest this is only realized under certain specific circumstances and at certain times. The recurring celebrations and parties could sometimes provide a time and place for this sense of brotherhood to be manifested, and those with experience from the building-up phase of a neighborhood gang talked of this construction time

as a period where this sense of brotherhood was more readily present. However, in general, the ability of gangs to serve as arenas of belonging and respect appears to be rather fragile. Instead of cooperation and reciprocity, there is often competition for resources and status. And instead of a situation in which respect is awarded in an expanding universe, it becomes a distribution capital from a kind of zero-sum game in which one person's respect is valued in relation to a hierarchical order where those higher up are awarded greater rights and status than those on a lower level (e.g. Anderson, 1999). In a situation like this, for example, it may not be the exact sum of money that you have managed to acquire that is the essential factor, but instead the degree to which you have earned more or less than others. This automatically turns into a struggle to climb higher up the social ladder. Being part of a gang is therefore also in some respects about navigating a distinctive market situation.

Tensions and conflicts occur in all organizational settings, and need to be handled in a way that avoids harming the organization's existence. For example, individual employees might argue that they deserve a higher salary, but at the same time they can accept that they are allowed to pursue this issue through negotiation. Thus, there are institutionally legitimate tensions that can be reduced through conflict resolution mechanisms. The gangs are to a very high degree forced to cope with such tensions and conflicts, internal as well external, but often lack the organizational capacity and tools to settle disputes. In such contexts, violence could become a default way of settling disputes. This instrument of conflict management is problematic, however, as it easily reinforces the tensions and conflicts it is being used to handle, and is thus counterproductive. To be forced to fight for your position on the market can mean having to defend your name through the use of violence, with acts of violence easily leading to a constant threat of violent conflict, given the norm of retaliation. In this way, while the gang offers hope for community and brotherhood, the underdeveloped institutional regulators of conflict often found in such groups produce the forces that make it difficult to remain a member of the gangs explored in this study.

At the same time, the ideas of belonging, brotherhood, and success live on. Why this is the case may not always or primarily have to do with a detailed evaluation of how current gangs have succeeded as organizations, but instead with what ideas and myths are distributed about them and how they present themselves in different local settings. One should naturally add to this that the hopes must also be understood in relation to how the rest of society functions, what values are central, and how different groups perceive their opportunities to realize their hopes in their lives.

8.7 Navigation from Gangs – Moral and Emotional Transformations of Masculinity

By navigation we refer here to the human ability (and necessity) to interpret one's environment and, with the support of earlier experiences, translate this interpretation into a suitable course of action – a mechanism that guides human deliberations

and transforms them into actions toward a desired or at least preferred pathway. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe how this capacity for action (agency) is based on a person's interaction with their environment, and through the material, social, and cultural worlds that they relate to. What is commonly expressed as individual can be viewed as the result of how this dynamic is resolved: between the person's direct actions, the current environment, and the individual's stored potential that has been created from previous experiences of social and cultural structures and patterns (e.g. Laub & Sampson, 2001).

We have argued above that the positive expectations of the gang life of new members can fade once individuals realize the considerable difficulties the gang has in achieving these. Members can become disillusioned with the idea of brotherhood, or at least the gang's ability to help realize this potential. As we have previously emphasized, it is essential to discuss gender issues when conducting research into crime in general, and masculinity in particular, when it comes to a certain type of crime and groups. In general, masculinity is the norm within the gangs, and although women are present, they have a subordinate position. The desire to achieve a hegemonic masculinity position are in many cases reinforced and redesigned within this arena, and could function to retaliate against previous experiences of shortcomings and being unnoticed. At the same time, gang life means that social and cultural codes are reinforced, as the gang serves as a socialization arena for a certain type of masculinity capital and provides a yardstick for how different masculinities are valued. Strength, self-governance, and courage clearly rate higher than weakness, influenceability, and anxiety. But what happens to these norms of masculinity once one leaves the gang? What parts of this developed capital can be used outside the gang and what parts need to be altered to be successful outside this social context?

Firstly, among the people we met with, hardly anyone attributed their exit from the gang, or leaving a life of crime, to there being anything wrong with committing crimes per se, or said that it was having a negative influence on society in some other way. Instead, their exit was explained by their adoption of a different kind of attitude toward responsibility and care for others, whereby gang life had become too psychologically strenuous, the consequences in the form of a prison sentence, or being subjected to violence were too tangible. Above all, however, the responsibility they felt to care for others was emphasized, especially when it came to children and family. At least based on what the men themselves told us, one might say that the new orientation meant a connection to a kind of care ethic, discussed within feminist theory of ethics (Kakkori & Huttunen, 2010; Tong, 1998). How ethical values would translate to moral action must in this line of ideas be determined in specific situations, balancing between a multitude of objectives and consequences, and related to how one's actions affect those who are close and for whom one is responsible (Gilligan, 1993).

While the men described such changes, it is important to note there can be a difference between how the men presented themselves and their changes, and how people around them viewed how pervasive or persistent their behavior was over time and in different contexts. At the same time, there is value in observing how the

men reflected on their previous way of life and what changes they felt they had undergone. This is particularly interesting as these phases are important parts of a new orientation, regardless of whether it is difficult to fully realize and hard to maintain over time.

8.8 Being There for Others

Care Provider With few exceptions, the men we interviewed said that the responsibility for others was the most important reason that they chose to leave the gang and did not want to return. The people to whom this care was directed were, above all, those who were supposed to be more long term in their lives, such as a prospective or existing wife, their own parents, other close relatives, and, in particular, their own children. Several people mentioned that a child's birth was a transformative event for them, albeit not necessarily the first child. Those who neglected their parenting responsibilities earlier wanted to compensate for this by being there for new children, or reconnecting with their past children. Values connected with the family, such as taking responsibility for children and acting as a good parent, appeared to appeal to a higher value than the life that was associated with the gang, and could therefore function partly as a motive for leaving the gang and partly as an anchoring point for their reconstructed masculinity. Those who had previously had difficulty being the parent, they now wanted to be, expressed regret and sadness about this, while still wishing to look ahead and make the most of a difficult situation. And even those who did not regret their own way of life before were able to strongly express their desire for their children not to get into the same lifestyle they had.

Role Model Connected to the dimension of responsibility and care, several people told us they were able to use their experiences to benefit others. It was not just about providing support and care, but being a person who could use their own experience as a model to inspire others. Primarily, they wanted to offer a model for their own children, but in the broader sense also wished to show that it was possible to implement major life changes and to choose a different path than they themselves had chosen. The advice that they had intended to give to the young people who were aspiring gang members can hardly be regarded as particularly new, but rather it was about being able to accept the normal roads of society to be successful, such as getting an education, earning good grades, trying to get a job, and starting a family.

However, the role model way of thinking did not only or primarily involve the type of advice to give, but rather it had to do with the legitimacy of the intermediary through the experience of "what it was really like" in the gang. In this particular case, the role model could possibly open up a previously blocked door to a real meeting regarding issues and life choices. This is where some people might argue that their experiences had given them a unique skill in getting their message across.

Love Life in the gang entails living in a context where violence occurs, and suspicion and deceit are inevitable elements. Leaving this type of life means confronting ethical questions about the meaning of life and the values that should govern your own life. This led to questions about what was good and evil and the issue of man's true nature. Some argued that people in the gang context are driven by aggression and some behave as if they are evil, but at the same time this raised questions about whether that was their true nature or whether violence was generated in the framework of the gang. When they talked about themselves, they generally made a clear distinction between the actions they felt compelled to perform versus who they really were. They described their true selves as kind and loving, with no desire to harm others. In the gang, however, diametrically opposed actions might become necessary. Some people could claim they were attracted to the violence, but it was mainly the fight, adrenaline kick, and excitement of the moment that they used as motivation, not the fact that they might hurt other people. Caring relationships, when meaningful, challenged some of the fundamental values connected to gang life. The sense of betraying those you were responsible for could create a dissonance between different positions and representations of masculinity.

If you start to feel something then you become weak and then you also start to think along the lines of "Wow, I can't do this because I might lose her, or I might lose that"... You should not have someone that you might need to take into consideration. And that was what was a bit tough when I received this last sentence... that there was someone to consider, there was a connection there that I just thought "No, now I have lost this. Damn!" Do you understand? I did not feel good because of that.

8.9 Being There for Yourself

The other aspect of the responsibility of masculinity is related to care for oneself. Here, a number of different dimensions are important. First is to have self-control, by being able to control oneself in situations where it had not always been possible in the past. Second was the ability to live with less financial resources than may have been the case before – to be moderate (realistic). Thirdly, to be calm, and allow oneself the opportunity to reflect on different situations and choices, but also to experience a form of harmony. Finally, to learn to accept one's situation and past experiences.

Self-Control – Reflexivity and Impulse Control To have self-control can be expressed as thinking before acting. During the time of being a gang member, there were fewer opportunities for this form of reflection. Within the framework of the gang, thinking before acting was not always feasible. Often on the contrary, it could serve the gang better if members were able to read the situation and act without careful consideration. After leaving the gang, this ability began to dissipate, often through training. Gang life supported people who acted spontaneously, at least when it involved emergency situations where violence was perceived as a necessary

conflict resolution strategy. To some, this may also have been a possibly subconscious strategy to avoid thinking and reflecting on one's actions, as this would have caused life in the gang to become problematic.

When people begin to reflect on their life and the future, it can mean that a door is opened which then becomes difficult to close. Once outside the gang, the individual can then gain a positive response from others to the fact that he has begun to think more, and has begun to act differently than with aggression in threatening situations.

Like that, I can control it. I can even think, you know, wait a minute, slow down, for example. So, I can start to feel you know, or even think. In the past, it was just impulsive and then I thought about it afterwards. So the actual development is that one instead of thinking perfectly right away, you wait and lean back and begin to think and write down what you feel and where [...] I want to take the respectful route. I want to take the good route. I want to show... One can solve it. People can agree. It's okay. That is to say, of course we forgive each other. All of this stuff you know.

Self-control is naturally linked with individual traits and abilities that are partly present within an individual from early years and which can, in part, be trained. An ability to control one's own emotions can, for example, mean that you can commit certain violent acts by preventing the expression of empathetic emotions, if the setting does not permit them. It is therefore not possible to view self-control as an isolated phenomenon; it must be seen in a contextual way, that is, in terms of what must be controlled and what can be released in the current situation. Control may involve suppressing emotions and suppressing the feelings and consequences of a caring principle – if it makes it impossible to step into the role that is demanded. While this capacity for control might exist within a certain context, the awareness of this forced course of action may create moral dilemmas for the individual, thereby contributing to the current masculinity and associated actions.

Moderation Life in a gang can be viewed as a system where brotherhood ideals are confronted with market terms and where the outcome is a kind of dominance in which status and success are regarded as relative to others. Here, such things as flashy cars, gold chains, and eating at expensive restaurants become symbolic attributes that testify to a person's success. Being able to live a posh lifestyle also creates a form of self-escalation logic where the kick one gets from a certain type of consumption must soon be surpassed by a new even grander and more astonishing kick in order to provide the desired effect. Once the members left the gang, they also left the dream of a fast income and the chance of an extravagant life (even though certainly not everyone was able to live a continuously good life on their crimes).

But where a new orientation from a dominance principle to a care principle becomes clearer, it appears that for many people there is a more or less automatic adjustment to reality, and the necessity of moderation. It is no longer about wearing the most expensive clothes, treating people to posh meals, or having a throwaway mentality. The new masculinity is not anchored on these foundations. In a way this is how it is: The expensive clothes, cars, and gold chains have no substantial

exchange value related to the cost of these items, but instead have a symbolic value that signifies success. However, a symbolic capital requires a certain specific context which shows it in the way it was intended, but when this context no longer exists, neither does the opportunity to increase one's capital in such a manner.

Acceptance Leaving one identity for another, one masculinity for another, entails profits as well as losses. It also means having to confront conditions and actions that one was responsible for in the previous life. Many had experienced situations that could be traumatizing. In order to cope with memories of these situations, the men used different management strategies. Some argued that such events belonged to the past and were therefore not worth thinking about, while others argued that one's actions followed the rules of the game, which everyone was aware of and which therefore cannot be seen as morally objectionable afterwards. Several people also talked about having support contacts where such experiences were raised in a kind of sheltered room that enabled them to be heard and thus processed. A consequence of certain processing mechanisms could be characterized as acceptance. This shows that the individual is aware of and can see his own part in various actions, that these behaviors had some sort of explanation to them, that the individual previously had difficulty acting in other ways, but at the same time was capable of changing his/her behavior. Acceptance can be viewed as a way to continue living, even though the individual might have committed acts they strongly desired to disassociate themselves from.

Acceptance, linked to the other ideals, also provides conditions for life satisfaction through other means. It is no longer a matter of getting kicks from committing crimes, or from the hedonic partying, that is emphasized as the very core of living; instead, these individuals described how everyday settings provided value and contentment. To begin to perceive and appreciate these sensations in everyday life can also change thought processes. Here, responsibility for the other person, for one's own child, and receiving positive feedback when one manages to meet expectations becomes a reinforcing feeling that one is on the right track and has discovered new values.

No, exactly. But the kick for me now is to arrive at kindergarten and have her come running. "Daddy, daddy." So I've found...it's important to get there too so that you appreciate those bits. I know of a lot of buddies who have kids, but they don't give a crap about them. They don't even want to know about them. And I don't get it...to me that's completely incomprehensible. How the hell can you...it's your kid. That's terrible...I'm going to do everything, you know, to...because that's what I've really been doing these past years. It's taken her six years to want to understand or start to accept.

Serenity Perhaps the strongest benefit the former gang members mentioned when they walked away from gang life was a feeling of serenity. For some people gang life was characterized by hard work, where one had to be vigilant "24/7." As a gang member they could never know for sure whether an enemy would suddenly appear to confront them or who would in the long run turn out to be an enemy. Many had also been forced to deal with their friends passing away for one reason or another.

They could never fully relax, as there were always other actors willing to take over their area, or deals that fell through. They also described how it was not always easy to protect oneself from self-doubt and guilt about the fact that loved ones were forced to suffer or were neglected because of their lifestyle.

Of course, I have a bit of anxiety over what I have done in my life, you know. And, of course I get a bit sad when I am sitting and thinking about it – what the hell have I done? Well, there are some excuses... [but] “life itself provided me with few other possibilities,” and in many situations it was like that, and on many occasions it wasn’t like that at all... And then I can feel that, yes, it is clear that one becomes sad.

Gang members described life after they left the gang as “no picnic,” as there were many obstacles to overcome financially, socially, and cognitively/emotionally. Yet for most people it was at the same time a much calmer lifestyle compared to before. A particular benefit of leaving the gang lifestyle, as described by members we interviewed, was feeling more peaceful. The ex-gang members described a positive feeling stemming from the knowledge that they would not be confronted with the constant navigation between what seemed the incompatible forces of brotherhood and competition that permeated the gang and created tensions that could never be fully rectified. In short, they described feeling at peace.

8.10 Discussion and Conclusion

One purpose of describing how gangs can operate in different markets where they meet with competing actors is to understand the dynamic that can be found in these contexts. It is our assertion that this dynamic is important in order to gain an in-depth picture of how these groups can function. It is also important to understand their actions that are a reasoned adaptation to the conditions of the specific market situation in which they operate. Another, and in this text even more important, objective is to point out the ubiquitous tensions and conflicts that gangs must deal with given their position in society. These tensions, in some cases, entail tangible risks to personal safety, and lead to a life that revolves around the gang’s activities. Thus, the mechanisms that work to prevent an exit from these groups emanate from gang life itself. To live in a gang can, at least for some people, entail a clearly regulated and restricted life, which greatly complicates the many other dreams, hopes, and temptations that a person might have. Leaving the gang must, therefore, be carried out within the mechanisms that are built into how the gang functions and its environmental conditions. These mechanisms interact with individual factors, while it is important to see the interplay. It is not only about an individual becoming more mature, but about the fact that the promise of brotherhood often goes unfulfilled, and that gangs in this way reject their own members. It is these forces and conditions of gang life that should be kept in mind in the development of policies and programs that aim to support individuals as they leave these contexts.

Research on the association between masculinity and gangs presents a strong link between socioeconomic marginalization and male gang formation. In such contexts, masculinities are developed in terms of compensatory masculinity, which may among other things be expressed in the form of protest masculinity, machismo, and hypermasculinity. These male formations can be interpreted as a reaction to difficult life circumstances, and also as a rational solution to what life in gangs requires, and what it takes to be a part of these homosocial contexts. Furthermore, research has discovered that once you have developed these masculinities, they become a way of expressing oneself, even in other than criminal contexts. Therefore, this type of compensatory male formation can pose a challenge when a person chooses to leave the gang.

Several of the men in our study talked about how gang life and its associated masculinity had become more and more difficult to live with and adjust to over time. The responsibility for others and for themselves became obvious, and among other things it provoked them into thinking about what kind of fathers they wanted to be. Some also began to feel guilty about actions where people who were not their enemies or adversaries had been injured. During gang life, these feelings of guilt were neutralized by a kind of collective processing, which made it possible to carry out acts that in other contexts they would have decided against. When a softer masculinity developed, which was more functional in life outside the gang, some men felt that they were taking off a mask that they had worn to prevent different forms of expression (e.g. McCall, 2005). Experiences of violence could at the same time be difficult to dismiss. And those who left the gang life could sometimes be hit by an “empathetic flashback,” where difficult memories of their own use of violence returned, without the group being on hand to provide support in the processing of these events. However, opening up to this form of masculinity can be perceived as threatening, and individuals in such situations may well want to protect themselves from being perceived as people who in their past life would have been regarded as the antithesis to their own identity.

The men in our study were in different phases of the exit process. Some had come quite far and had completely left gang life. They had a job, a place to live, and functioning social relationships. Others were in earlier phases of this process and therefore it is difficult to assess how their future will look. This has to do with the fact that several men had needs for support that were both complex and very extensive. Their lives had from the beginning been characterized by a struggle to be accepted by others. The gang held some hopes and promises, which were all gradually destroyed. However, life after leaving the gang should not necessarily be about distancing oneself from those hopes and promises. On the contrary, it is about trying to find relationships where these hopes and promises can be fulfilled over time and where the individual’s dreams of community, respect, and recognition can be mutually realized, and not at the expense of others.

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Chapter 9

Anger with Love: How Professionals Get Through to High-Risk Youth in Troublesome Groups



Jan Dirk de Jong and Adriaan Denkers

9.1 Introduction

Since 2007, data from the Dutch Juvenile Crime Monitor reveals a sharp decline in juvenile crime (van der Laan & Beerthuizen, 2018). While the juvenile crime drop is also observed in surrounding countries,¹ these declines are less sharp than in the Netherlands. There are several possible reasons for these findings, some of which relate to actual declines in juvenile delinquency, and others merely to methodological artifacts (van Ham, Bervoets, & Ferwerda, 2015). Within specific Dutch target groups, like repeat juvenile delinquents (who are disproportionately of immigrant origin and living in large cities), rates of recidivism remain high (Weijers, 2019). A large proportion of these repeat delinquents have been found to be characterized by a mild intellectual disability (MID; Kaal, 2016). Of particular concern within the Netherlands is the finding that youths within these groups commit serious and violent crimes at an increasingly younger age (van Wijk, Hardeman, & Scholten, 2015).

Motivated by the high recidivism rates and seriousness of offending within specific youth groups, the Dutch government dedicates significant attention to the development of a comprehensive approach to reduce juvenile crime among these troublesome youth groups (Ferwerda & van Ham, 2017). Municipalities invested in numerous programs targeted at reducing juvenile delinquency. Within a local comprehensive approach, the highest risk youth and their families were targeted with deterrence-based interventions through the use of repressive measures. Many municipalities also invested in *preventive* strategies aimed at achieving long-term reduction in antisocial behavior. Some of these preventive programs show encour-

¹ See Eurostat (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Archive:Crime_statistics)

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aging results (Loef, Schaafsma, & Hilhorst, 2012). However, several researchers concluded that preventive programs do not always lead to anticipated results and that only a few specific intervention strategies have been proven promising (van Burik et al., 2013; Verdurmen et al., 2003). Even interventions with promising outcomes do not always turn out equally successful results when replicated, especially when implemented half-heartedly (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999). The energy and funding invested in preventive programs, therefore, do not always deliver the expected or desired returns. This seems especially true with regard to high-risk youth.

Within the Netherlands, municipalities generally try to base the selection and funding of preventive programs on both practical and scientific “proof” about *what works*. Because scientific proof is scarce, in reality they tend to base their choice for a certain method or intervention on a “proven” track record or accounts about successes in other municipalities. The effectiveness of this decision strategy is unclear. Besides that, the municipalities’ decision makers seem to hardly pay any attention to *who works*, in terms of perceived personal qualities of the professionals who work directly with the high-risk youth in these programs. This is remarkable, as all parties involved – youth, family members, and professionals – predominantly point to the importance of the relationship between the professional and the youngsters when asked what makes an intervention effective (de Jong, 2013; Lenkens et al., 2019; Witvliet, Snijdwint, Bertling, Kaal, & van Scheppingen, 2015). Those directly involved routinely mention the importance of a connection between the interventionists and the young people involved in the program; youths specifically mention the importance of a professional who is perceived as “real” and as sincerely involved in their lives (de Jong, 2016a; Martinez & Abrams, 2013; van Gemert, 2015).

Unfortunately, research on “who works” is scarce within this field. What is known mostly stems from court-mandated social work, in particular pertaining to the craftsmanship of probation supervisors (Durnescu, 2012; Menger & Donker, 2013) and secure residential youth care professionals (Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2013; Souverein et al., 2018). This research has shown that perceived security and reliability are important. The latter means that the professional seems to live up to his/her word and offers concrete help or practical solutions to urgent problems and also that there is clarity and accordance between the youth and the professional about tasks and goals, in particular concerning the population with a MID (Vrij, Menger, Donker, & Kaal, 2016). Logically, from the perspective of the youth concerned, continuity plays an important role, as they do not want to constantly deal with getting used to new professionals (de Vogel & Bosker, 2018). Menger (2018) views the working alliance as the integration of the importance and effectiveness of being clear on goals and restrictions, with the trustworthy and respectful treatment of clients. But her findings are more explicit about the importance of *reliability* (clear communication of goals and restrictions) than what it means to develop a good *relationship* between the professional and a young client. In line with this, Harder et al. (2013) stated that an affective bond should be no precondition for an adolescent to experience the staff as a secure base.

Other studies stress that, besides safety and reliability, creating a warm atmosphere is important: listening to youth; being available; taking wishes of the person seriously; and showing respect, reciprocity, and trust (Souverein et al., 2018; ten Brummelaar, Harder, Kalverboer, Post, & Knorth, 2017). Looking into “who works,” therefore, also requires looking more at the type of social relationship that develops between the professional and a young person in terms of social bonding or feelings of social inclusion. Knowledge about the influence of perceived qualities of the professional on the relationship with youth, and its consequences for behavioral change, still seems quite limited. In Dutch practice, “who works” research is mostly qualitative and focuses on topics like how working with high-risk youth needs to be tailor-made (“maatwerk”; Bakker, Distelbrink, Pels, & Los, 2013), on the tips and tricks that enable making a better connection with high-risk youth (Vogelvang, 2015), or on desirable character traits found among professionals who seem to be exceptionally good at making a good connection (de Jong, van den Broek, & Vrij, 2017; Souverein et al., 2018).

The notion that, besides “what works,” the success of interventions may depend on “who works” is suggested by research results in therapeutic settings (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Becker-Weidman & Hughes, 2008). But it might be just as important in social services on the streets and court-mandated social work. De Jong (2016a) found that high-risk youths tend to discuss the social relationship they experience with such professionals. Some high-risk youngsters described successful professionals to provide some form of tough love, or “anger with love,” as a key component within that relationship (de Jong, 2016b). In their descriptions, youths indicate that good mentors – youth, social or case workers, and other professional helpers or supervisors – give them the desired attention, help, or support, besides clarity on goals and boundaries. These youngsters also state that good professionals treat them strictly and get upset with them at times. When professionals act in such a stern manner, the youngsters indicate they feel that the professional really cares about them, rather than interpreting the professional is upset out of frustration or because he or she thinks the youth is “unworthy,” or a bad person. Being “told off” by a professional who really cares could therefore be seen as part of a psychological repair cycle. The young person does not feel that he or she is an unworthy or bad person, but rather that what he or she did was wrong. A warm connection with such a stern professional can motivate a youngster to reconsider his or her behavior and atone or repair. In white-collar criminology, this idea has been used in Braithwaite’s well-known theory of re-integrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989). In the absence of a sound relationship, being told off is most likely to result in feelings of rejection, feelings of disintegrative shame, and an inclination to distance oneself from the stern professional (Dorahy, 2010).

Not only young people but also the professionals involved recognize this concept of “anger with love” as an important mechanism in achieving results among their targets (de Jong, 2018; Jongman & Schaafsma, 2016). A professional’s “anger with love” could, therefore, be an important ingredient in the mix that determines the effect of an intervention on behavioral change among high-risk youths. First, it is important to better understand what is meant by “anger with love.” In order to do

that, we will look at the literature and also the emic meaning of this sensitizing concept. Secondly, a qualitative study based on interviews with high-risk youths was conducted to determine to which extent they spontaneously mention the professional's "anger with love," and also perceive "anger with love" as an important behavioral influencing factor. Lastly, a survey study tries to determine whether "anger with love" is related to less delinquent behavior, and to which extent peer group norms influence this relationship.

9.2 High-Risk Youth in the Netherlands

One of the most consistent findings in criminology is the age–crime curve (Moffitt, 1993, 2018), suggesting the percentage of offenders in a population tends to increase from late childhood, to peak around ages 15–19, and then to decline from the early 20s. This literature also suggests that males tend to engage in offending more frequently than females (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005), and involvement in a troublesome youth group or street gang leads to increased offending (Decker & Weerman, 2005). Because of the high rate of delinquency among young males who are part of troublesome youth groups, there is a lot of research on risk factors associated with this status. This research suggests the risk associated with involvement in troublesome youth groups cuts across five domains: individual, peers, family, school, and community (Howell and Egley, 2005). Youths who present characteristics associated with risk across this range of circumstances are particularly vulnerable for problematic behaviors, such as substance abuse, school failure, and juvenile delinquency and/or gang membership, along with mental health complaints, such as depression and anxiety.

In this study, however, we focus on a specific target group of *high-risk youth* in the Netherlands. Cumulatively, this target group of high-risk youth may be small in number, but they pose a serious social problem in the Dutch society. In line with another consistent finding within criminology, this small percentage of the population of juvenile offenders is responsible for a large proportion of crime (Loeber, Slot, & Sergeant, 2001). The violent and property crime associated with this target group has a major social impact, in particular pertaining to feelings of safety and quality of life in city centers and suburban areas. Therefore, in the Netherlands, their criminal activities are sometimes also referred to as *High Impact Crimes*. In addition, recidivism rates are excessive among high-risk youths, up to 70–75% within 2 years post-conviction (Beerthuizen, Tollenaar, & van der Laan, 2018). In addition to these findings, professionals who work in the social and safety domains (teachers, youth or care workers, probation officers or policemen, and other professionals that contribute to the transition to adulthood of this target group) indicate that they encounter many serious problems with regard to this target group. In particular, they encounter resistance when they set out to reach these young people in order to help them, to provide them with a better future, and to steer them away from undesirable behavior and bad influences.

The first study of this chapter targets Dutch high-risk youths. High-risk youths were drawn from two groups: juvenile repeat offenders (*minderjarige jonge veelplegers*) and young adult very active repeat offenders (*zeer actieve veelplegers*). Juvenile repeat offenders are young persons between the ages of 12 and 17 who have been charged officially more than five crimes, of which at least one occurred within the reference year. Young adult very active repeat offenders are young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 with more than ten official charges, of which at least one occurred in the reference year. The young adult very active repeat offender starts his/her criminal career at the age of 15 on average (Weijers, 2019). In both categories of high-risk youth, men are highly overrepresented, and a relatively large proportion of this group lives in disadvantaged neighborhoods in larger cities. On top of that, young men with a migrant background, particularly with Moroccan parents (Bovenkerk, 2014), are overrepresented, though this overrepresentation is declining.² Finally, many young people in this target group are troubled by a myriad of behavioral and mental health issues (Segeren & Fassaert, 2014), including a notable prevalence of young people with a MID (Kaal, 2016), not in the least among those young people who also have an immigrant background (de Jong & Kaal, 2017).

9.3 Group Norms and Deviant Behavior

Not all young people living in a disadvantaged neighborhood, with a migrant background and struggling with MID, end up committing crimes or becoming “high-risk” youths. Research has shown that young people who are part of troublesome youth groups are at greater risk of developing such deviant behaviors. The influence of peers and youths’ adaptation to antisocial group norms remains a convincing explanation of deviant behavior (Akers, 1973; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Warr, 2002). Pertaining to the target group of high-risk youth, this explanation could be particularly powerful (Weijers, 2019). Within the Netherlands, youths, particularly those of a Moroccan background, experience a lot of peer pressure to offend, which evidence suggests is from limited opportunities to experience social inclusion from other groups, a negative social identity, and strong in-group versus out-group feelings regarding Moroccans within the society (de Jong, 2012). In addition, young people with a mild intellectual disability have been found to be characterized by limited impulse control and higher susceptibility to peer influence, resulting in a higher likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior (Moonen & Kaal, 2017).

A young person who feels excluded in particular social environments is likely to bond with a group where he or she feels included; a youth strives to feel recognized as a relevant person, belong as a group member, and be meaningful to others for

² See Central Bureau of Statistics of the Netherlands (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2018/47/criminaliteit>)

who they are associated (de Jong, 2017). In such situations, young people from the target group might experience extra pressure to align their behavior with prevailing group norms. And if this group is a troublesome youth group with deviant group norms, the young person therefore runs a high risk of exhibiting antisocial behavior. Antisocial behavior refers to actions that harm or lack consideration for the well-being of others; in the case of our target group this includes violence, property crime, and substance abuse given the prevailing norms of street culture (Ilan, 2015).

The perception of social inclusion and feelings of well-being experienced by a high-risk youth as a result of participating in a troublesome youth group with deviant group norms may be an important reason why he or she may find it difficult to break away from this group and exhibit less deviant behavior. However, if an alternative social relationship emerges that also evokes an experience of social inclusion, confirmed by a perception of “anger with love,” this connection could possibly serve as a protective factor, in the sense that it would be a counterpart to the troublesome youth group.

9.4 Defining and Conceptualizing “Anger with Love”

Bill Milliken, the founder of the American program Communities in Schools, is believed to have coined the concept of *tough love*. In a book with that same title, he describes it as someone who treats another person harshly or sternly with the intent to help them in the long run (Milliken & Meredith, 1968). Later, Milliken further articulated this expression by stating, “I don’t care how this makes you feel toward me. You may hate my guts, but I love you, and I am doing this because I love you” (Milliken, 2007: 45). The term “tough love” has been used in studies on, among other things, approaches to intervene in drug addiction, parental assistance, and policies on social work in a broader sense (Burns & Peyrot, 2003; Jordan, 2000; Siennick, 2011). However, it does not seem to have been used in research on preventive strategies for juvenile crime or troublesome youth groups, and certainly not in the emic variant “anger with love.” This particular notion was picked up during fieldwork among high-risk youths in Amsterdam when a young frequent offender of Moroccan decent expressed himself in a striking way explaining his personal need for tough love (de Jong, 2016b).

This young adult very active repeat offender, 22 years of age, had been in trouble most of his young life. His parents had migrated to the Netherlands from Morocco in the early 1980s. After he was born a few years later in Amsterdam, he and his siblings were exposed to many problems at home: domestic violence, poverty, crime, and substance abuse. As a boy he took to the streets at an early age, hanging around with troublesome youth groups and getting into trouble in his disadvantaged neighborhood. He did not consider his home a safe environment to live, especially after an incident where he stabbed his own brother, severely wounding him (from which his brother fortunately recovered). After the first few times that he came into contact with the law, contacts with professionals of Dutch youth services and child

protection agencies became a part of his life. He was eventually institutionalized and worked his way through several juvenile detention centers. Out of all these experiences, and associated trauma, this young man developed a substantial distrust toward authorities, social workers, and people in general. He was known to refuse to cooperate with any care givers he met or to follow any instructions given to him by supervisors, even if these were clearly in his best interest. He was also known to react with threats of physical violence in many of these situations.

When a judge finally put him in an assisted living facility in Amsterdam as a form of court-mandated social work, many professionals that had worked with this particular “hard case” were very surprised to find out that, apparently for the first time, this young man seemed to have faith in these social workers. He followed their instructions and also accepted stern scolding and behavioral corrections without reacting violently (like he normally would). When asked why he responded this way to his main social worker, and why this was not the case with his former care givers, his response was: “He gives me *anger with love*.”

In his answers to follow-up questions, he described situations that made him feel like he now had a sort of father figure, a concerned uncle or a big brother looking out for him. He explained that this professional would indeed often get “angry” with him when he misbehaved or did something wrong. But he always interpreted this “angry” attitude to be a sign that this man wanted the best for him and really cared about what would happen if he would make the wrong choices in life. The young man also spoke of “wisselgeld” (spare change), a Dutch expression that means the social worker had built up credit with him because of extra efforts and sacrifices on his behalf. Because of this “wisselgeld,” he felt this professional was in his right to get angry. The young man even felt ashamed toward his social worker whenever he messed up.

Based on what this young man explained about “anger with love,” we should understand two things. Firstly, he talks in crude terms about “anger” because that is how young people with his background and limitations express themselves regarding emotions and social behavior (van Nieuwenhuijzen et al., 2007). Therefore, “anger” in his terms covers a broad range of actions, from a person clearly letting you know they are not amused and rather cross with you, to someone bursting into a raging fury. Secondly, there is a fine line between “anger” in terms of social correction (getting cross or telling someone off) and abusive behavior. Social correction is considered to be part of the anger in “anger with love,” and abusive behavior is not. Abusive behavior by a professional in a clinical or social service setting is not considered to be appropriate or acceptable.

The young man’s description of “anger with love” was utilized as a *sensitizing concept* for further data collection and analysis (Bowen, 2006). Soon after being sensitized by the young man’s description, similar expressions were observed from other youths within the same target group (de Jong et al., 2017). After writing and talking about this concept, Dutch practitioners and policy makers started sharing their ideas about the importance of such a concept, and how “anger with love” might advance the effectiveness of social work (de Jong, 2018). Also, the concept related to existing notions about the importance of a connection between the professional

and a child or young person before the correction of behavior (Ross, Polaschek, & Ward, 2008), marked by a combination of kindness and firmness within such a relationship (Nelsen, 2006). But maybe most striking was the fact that the concept seems to resonate with a key concept in the vast literature on parenting styles (Lau, Wong, & Dudovitz, 2018).

9.4.1 Parenting Styles

The term “anger with love,” as used in the present paper, is derived from observations within the field of social work. Within that field, “anger with love” appears to be a new concept. This does not seem to be the case within the literature on parenting styles and the influence of these styles on adolescent health (a lot of those studies seem to pertain either to tobacco, alcohol and substance abuse, or school climate). Baumrind’s landmark theory in this field of expertise states that the most effective styles involve a healthy balance between *responsiveness* (or support) and *demandingness* (or structure; Baumrind, 1968). Based on these two dimensions, Baumrind has described four parenting styles: authoritative (highly responsive and highly demanding), authoritarian (highly demanding, but not responsive), permissive (highly responsive, but not demanding), and neglectful (neither demanding nor responsive). Studies generally suggest that the authoritative style is associated with the most positive adolescent health outcomes (Hoeve, Dubas, Gerris, Van der Laan, & Smeenk, 2011; Piko & Balázs, 2012). Baumrind’s authoritative parenting style does resemble the notion of “anger (demanding) with love (responsive),” affirming the notion that clear rules and boundaries in combination with positive affective interactions are key in youths’ pro-social development.

All of this indicates that the emic concept of “anger with love” might be truly important in the reduction of youth crime, or at least in preventive methods and interventions aimed at reducing recidivism and stimulating positive behavioral change. The general idea is that in order to break the cycle of peer influence, which is so powerful within this target group of high-risk youths, it may be vital that they find a form of social inclusion elsewhere (confirmed by “anger with love”): they need alternative social contact to feel they are seen, they belong, and they matter to others.

9.5 Central Hypotheses

The aim of this study is to better understand if a specific element of “who works,” namely, the concept of “anger with love,” is related to the effectiveness of a preventive approach to youth crime.

Hypothesis 1

Criminal youths recognize “anger with love,” or some variation on the concept of tough love, as important, and also see it as an instigator for positive behavioral change.

Hypothesis 2

Acceptance of deviant peer group norms are positively related to antisocial behavior.

Hypothesis 3

Young people’s perceptions of the degree to which professionals provide “anger” and “love” are negatively related to antisocial behavior. Antisocial behavior is expected to be particularly low among young people who have professionals that provide high levels of “anger” and “love.”

Hypothesis 4

The relationship between “anger with love” and antisocial behavior is especially strong among youngsters in groups that are characterized by more deviant group norms.

These hypotheses were researched in a two-part study. Hypothesis 1 was tested in a qualitative study among 13 respondents (most of whom are high-risk youths). Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 have been tested in a quantitative study among 180 students of Leiden University.

9.6 Study 1: “Anger with Love” Among High-Risk Youth

In order to explore whether high-risk youths recognize “anger with love” (or another variant of the concept of tough love) as an important factor in their working relationship with professionals, and as an instigator for changing their antisocial behavior, interview material from a qualitative study on the life course of 13 delinquent youths with a mild intellectual disability (MID) were examined (Kaal & de Jong, 2018). The original approach of this project was to get these youths talk about their lives and their experiences at home, in school, on the streets, and with professionals or institutions. No specific questions were asked relating to the concept of tough love within their relationships with professionals. This approach helps us to establish whether high-risk youths spontaneously recognize “anger with love” as a relevant concept.

The aim was to select a representative group of delinquent youths with MID with respect to age, crime, and housing situation. In practice, however, recruiting young people from the target group proved to be quite difficult. One of the reasons was that institutions were afraid that participating in the research was too burdensome for their clients. Once we had established contact with potential respondents, often through other channels than originally intended (such as a youth worker or another intermediary), these young people appeared enthusiastic and gave their consent. Ultimately, 13 young people were interviewed for the study. They were all boys and

their ages ranged from 16 to 22 years, with one exception of a 28-year-old respondent. The respondents committed a whole range of different crimes, varying from theft, armed robbery, and drug dealing to rape. Based on the criteria, such as age (between 12 and 24 years), ethnic background (6 have a non-Western migration background), living environment (all grew up in problematic homes and took to the streets in disadvantaged neighborhood), and criminal career (looking at the severity of the crime and the age of onset), 11 respondents fell within the target high-risk youth group. In this chapter, only the data of these 11 respondents were used. Seven of them lived in an assisted living facility, three of them lived at home with their parents, and one lived in a secure youth care institution.

Interviewing youngsters with MID requires a specific approach. For instance, the interviewer needs to take into account that the interviewee's memory, focus, and ability to distinguish between main and secondary issues are likely to be limited. Therefore, a protocol was developed for this project that included three meetings: (1) a first meeting focused on getting acquainted and creating a familiar situation; (2) a follow-up conversation focused on the life story of the young person and the place of delinquent behavior therein; and finally, (3) a conversation focused on their social network and the future perspective of the young person. An important tool was the use of a timeline to help young people to organize their thoughts. With the aid of this timeline, respondents indicated when certain events took place in their lives and their sense of well-being in different stages of their lives. The conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts subsequently were organized into chronological stories.

The use of timelines proved helpful when analyzing the respondents' stories. In these analyses, three elements were plotted on the timeline: well-being, problems and delinquent behavior, and life events (including consequences of their own delinquent behavior). Two independent researchers analyzed the respondents' interview data and coded all relevant statements, particularly those that indicate that these delinquent youngsters recognize "anger with love" as something important, and those that indicate that respondents perceive that receiving "anger with love" is related to behavioral change. Afterward, the coded statements from the two researchers were compared for similarity. Only statements that were coded identically by both researchers were included.

9.6.1 Results: Qualitative Research

The interviews revealed that all respondents commented often about their experiences with professionals and institutions. All of the 11 youths had bad experiences on this front. One of them expressed³: "*Promising one thing and doing another. Or not following up on their promises or simply being bad at their job, being negligent*

³All quotes used in this article have been translated from Dutch to English.

and lazy. Showing up at a time that they know I can't be there and saying that I should. That makes no sense. It simply doesn't work." Another high-risk respondent took it even further: *"Actually, I hate all social workers. They come to your house one day and expect you to receive them with open arms. It may be that they mean well, but all of us are reluctant to meet with them, believe me."*

However, not all comments about the professionals were negative: *"One person just gets you, while another doesn't. One person might make an effort to really get to know you. And another, how do I say this... just works by the book. Some of them are like machines, for real. One guy was different. He was just honest. Not fake. Sometimes you get people who are genuinely interested in you."* The respondents expressed clear views on what they do and do not appreciate about professionals. Many of these comments are in line with the notion that professionals are more effective when they are explicit regarding goals and restrictions (Menger, 2018), as one respondent expressed with regard to a positive experience with a professional: *"I was told I had an appointment with this new guy the next day. With other institutions I was used to having to wait a month before an intake could take place. But this guy stood in front of me the next day! And he was like: "These are the rules. This is how we work with clients to help them. And this is how we treat each other. And then some things about the organization. Very clear. I had already heard about them from other inmates too."*

The majority of respondents, seven out of 11, explicitly mentioned at least some form of "anger with love" (or tough love) that they had experienced within a relationship with a professional (e.g., a teacher, youth worker, or social worker) or another key adult figure in their life (an extended family member, a neighbor or a coach). Three of the 11 respondents did not mention anything that resembled the concept of "anger with love." The statements of one respondent regarding "anger with love" were too unclear to interpret and were therefore omitted. The seven respondents that do mention an experience resembling "anger with love" elaborated on these interactions and, by doing so, seem to stress the significance of the concept. Three examples of how they described "anger with love" are:

What worked was mainly how he reacted to me. He would motivate, like: "Man, if you can do that, you can do this, too." But he could also fuck with me, you know. He would challenge me. We've had situations where he really fell out with me. (respondent 5)

This guy was also from one of these organizations, but he was different. He talked to me. We did nice things together. And he was smart, very smart. Yeah, he really was a nice guy. And he told me what the deal was. Simply: it's like this. Quit your whining. You know, some hard truths, but with good intentions. (respondent 7)

This guy knows me. If I go down the wrong path, he grabs me and kicks my ass, so to speak. Finds a job for me and tells me to go work there." [...] "He treats me right. When I make a mistake, he lets me know and gives me a chance to correct my mistake. If he gets angry, he says: "Go to the gym." Makes me work out. (respondent 11)

Only one respondent spontaneously provided an unambiguous example of how their relationship with an "anger with love" providing professional contributed to a reduction of crime involvement. That example pertains mostly to social behavior: meeting other people and being around the same people in a different manner. This

youth says: *“Because of him and his way, I hung around with different people than before. I was hanging around less with the people who were doing burglaries. I saw them from time to time, but not for real. In that time, I quit crime. If you needed something, I would send you on to the other guys. During that period, I had no contact with the cops.”* Another respondent related a professional’s “anger with love” to an increase of positive behavior: *“We did nice things together. See a movie, skating. We’d eat out often. Yeah, even reading books together. And when he was gone, I’d continue reading myself. What the fuck, man. I’m reading a book like it’s nothing!”*

A third respondent related “anger with love” to a reduction of crime; however, this story does not regard a professional, but the “anger with love” provided by a girlfriend: *“Every time I was considering doing something, she’d get very mad at me. At some point, I think, we had had such a fierce fight because of that, that I decided to quit crime.”* [...] *“Even after we’d broken up, she said to me: ‘I hear you are doing robberies again.’ I said: ‘Who told you that?’ She said: ‘That doesn’t matter. Even though we are not together anymore, I want you to know I still love you, and I don’t want you to do that stuff.’”* This respondent, however, in the subsequent years to the interview did resort to crime and came into contact with the police.

9.6.2 Summary

The accounts in this study suggest that “anger with love” is relevant to high-risk youth. More than half of the respondents spontaneously mention the importance of the professional’s “anger with love” while being interviewed about their lives. Almost half of these respondents relate receiving “anger with love” to behavioral change, either to a reduction of crime or an enhancement of pro-social behavior.

9.7 Study 2: “Anger with Love” Among Students

The results of the first study suggest that criminal youths do spontaneously mention professionals’ “anger with love,” thus partly offering support for the first hypothesis. The study, however, did not show much support for the assumption that the target group spontaneously relate “anger with love” to behavioral changes within themselves. The second study focuses on the second, third, and fourth hypotheses: (2) deviant peer group norms related to young people’s antisocial behavior; (3) young people’s perceptions about the “anger” and “love” as provided by an important professional related to less deviant behavior, and deviant behavior especially low when both “anger” and “love” are perceived to be high; (4) the relationship between the professional’s “anger with love” and antisocial behavior especially strong among youngsters who perceive a more deviant group norm.

9.7.1 Procedure

During a lecture in April 2018, students at the University of Applied Science in Leiden were requested to partake in this study by filling out an online questionnaire via Qualtrics. Students received on their university account a mail with a link. Clicking on the link opened the questionnaire. The students were ensured that participation was voluntary and that the survey was anonymous. While participants did not receive extra credit, they were told that they could win a prize by filling out a quiz at the end of the questionnaire. On average, it took the participants thirteen and a half minutes to finish the questionnaire, including the quiz questions. After the participants finished, students were debriefed about the nature and purpose of the study. All students were also later presented a video message with some of the main results of the study.

9.7.2 Participants

A total of 180 students, with an average age of almost 21 years, participated. In line with the gender distribution among psychology students, 18 percent of the respondents were male and 82% were female. Of these participants, 53% reported to be in the first year of their study, 46% in their second, and 1% in their third year.

9.7.3 Measures

The questionnaire consisted of 85 questions, partly relevant to the current study. This study focused on four concepts: self-reported delinquency, perceived professional's "love" and perceived professional's "anger," perceived peer group norms, and social desirability. The measurement of these concepts is explained below.

9.7.3.1 Self-Reported Delinquency

Participants were asked: "Did you during the past year...?" followed by 15 (randomly ordered) behaviors. Nine of these intended to measure delinquency: used soft drugs, used hard drugs, sold drugs, destroyed someone else's property, stole things from a shop worth less than 5 euros, stole things from a shop worth more than 5 euros, bought stolen goods, stole a bike or motor cycle, hit someone so hard that he/she got wounded or hurt. The use of these or comparable items to measure self-reported delinquency is common practice within criminological research (see, for instance, Sanches, Gouveia-Pereira, Marôco, Gomes, & Roncon, 2016; Weerman, 2011). In most studies, participants are offered the opportunity to answer either

dichotomously (no/yes) or by reporting the frequency of offending (number of times; Sweeten, 2012). Participants scored their answers on visual analogue scales (continuous bars that participants can click on), ranging from “never” (invisible for the participants scored as 0.00) to “often” (invisible for the participants scored as 100.00). Reason for the use of these scales is they were expected to save space, are more appealing to participants, and might deliver more variance (Toepoel & Funke, 2018). To ensure that scores intended to indicate “never” would be interpreted as such (because of the apparently constant scale with 10,000 “pixels,” participants who want to score 0.00, “never,” might click near to 0 without noticing clicking somewhat above), scores below 1.00 were recoded to 1. Because the scores are heavily skewed toward “never,” the scores were inverted ($1 - 1 / \text{score}$), resulting in scores ranging from 0 (never) to 0.99 (often). Using the inverted scores, a factor analysis revealed a four factor structure, related to theft (3 items; $\alpha = 0.84$), crime in association (2 items, handling stolen goods and dealing drugs; $r = 0.65$, $\alpha = 0.79$), aggression (2 items, assault and destruction; $r = 0.53$, $\alpha = 0.70$), and drug use ($r = 0.50$, $\alpha = 0.66$). The four scales were constructed by computing the means of the relevant variables. A secondary factor analysis using the four specific delinquency scales revealed a one-factor solution (eigenvalue > 1). Because this study focuses on delinquency in general, a total self-reported delinquency scale was constructed by computing the means of the four delinquency sub-scales ($\alpha = 0.82$) and used in the analyses.

9.7.3.2 Perceptions About the Professional: ‘Anger with Love’

First, participants were asked to describe the function of the university’s employee who was most important to them. The majority of participants (64%) reported their “study career counselor” to be the most important professional. Next, the participants answered 5 (randomly ordered) questions about this employee, three relating to “love” (This employee recognizes/values/understands me; $\alpha = 0.89$) and two related to “anger” (This employee ... is strict/corrects me; $r = 0.41$, $\alpha = 0.58$). Participants responded to these questions with the aid of visual analogue scales, ranging from “certainly not” (scored as 0.00, not visibly presented to participants) to “certainly” (scored as 100.00, not visibly presented to participants). Factor analyses confirmed the presumed two factor structure related to the “professional’s love” and “professional’s anger.” Both scales were constructed by computing the means of the relevant variables.

9.7.3.3 Perceived Delinquent Group Norms

Participants were asked three (randomly ordered) questions about peer group norms...: “The fellow students, whom I deal with a lot, think it’s good ... to steal something if one needs it/to lie if that renders a lot of money/to sometimes do illegal things as long as no one discovers it” ($\alpha = 0.70$). Participants responded to these

questions with the aid of visual analogue scales, ranging from “certainly not” (scored as 0.00, not visibly presented to participants) to “certainly” (scored as 100.00, not visibly presented to participants). A scale for perceived group norms was constructed by computing the means of the scores on these three variables.

9.7.3.4 Social Desirability

Social desirability was measured to control for participants’ tendency to deny behaviors or beliefs that are considered socially undesirable, like for instance aggression or stealing. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) is widely used. Gorsira and colleagues (2018) adapted this scale to better suit research on criminal behaviors. Here we use this adapted scale, containing four items: “benefited from another,” “took something (even if it was a pen or a pin) that didn’t belong to you,” “appropriated yourself more than you were entitled to,” and “made a promise you didn’t keep” ($\alpha = .67$). Participants answered these questions with the aid of visual analogue scales, ranging from “never” (invisible for the participants scored as 0.00) to “often” (invisible for the participants scored as 100.00). Theoretically, participants are expected to want to be perceived as good, decent, and non-delinquent (the social desirability bias). Participants who are characterized by a strong tendency for social desirability are expected to report less delinquency than they were actually involved in. Criminological research generally does not seem to take social desirability bias into account; therefore research papers within this discipline may occasionally report results that might be caused by a social desirability bias (Kolarcik, Geckova, Reijneveld, & van Dijk, 2016). Some research suggests that criminals score higher on social desirability than non-criminals (Kampfe, Penzhorn, Schikora, Dunzl, & Schneidenbach, 2009), suggesting that more serious delinquents might report less crime than they actually committed.

9.7.4 Analytic Strategy

To test the second, third, and fourth hypotheses, a regression analysis is conducted. In the first step of the analysis, besides professional’s “anger with love” and group norms, age, gender, and social desirability are entered into the equation. Age (Moffitt, 1993, 2018) and gender (Steffensmeier et al., 2005; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996) are included into the analyses, because within the criminological literature, these variables have often been found to be related to delinquency. In the second step of the analysis, social desirability is entered into the equation to control for social desirability bias. In the third step of the analyses, using stepwise procedure, the significant 2-way and 3-way interactions between “professional’s love,” “professional’s anger,” and group norms were entered into the equation. The interaction

Table 9.1 Self-reported delinquency explained by professional's "anger with love," group norm (delinquent), and social desirability (regression analyses)

	<i>r</i>		beta	<i>t</i>		beta		beta	<i>t</i>		
Gender	-0.22	**	-0.16	-2.13	*	-0.12	-1.61	-0.13	-1.83		
Age	-0.04		-0.01	-0.10		-0.01	-0.18	-0.02	-0.26		
Love	0.07		0.07	0.92		0.11	1.49	0.05	0.592		
Anger	0.10		0.09	1.17		0.06	0.74	0.07	0.93		
Group norm	0.30	***	0.29	3.87	***	0.18	2.37	*	0.15	1.98	*
Social desirability	-0.38	***				-0.30	-3.90	***	-0.29	-3.75	***
Love X anger	-0.21	**						-0.16	-2.09	*	
<i>r</i> _{adj}				11%			18%		19%		
F (df)			(5168)	=5.23	***	(6167)	=7.26	***	(7166)	=6.70	***

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

between "professional's love" and "professional's anger" and the 3 way-interaction are expected to be included.

9.7.5 Results

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 9.1. The second column of this table shows the correlations between the independent and dependent variables (i.e., the table shows that the correlation between gender and self-reported delinquency is .22). This column suggests that, as expected, gender (males), delinquent group norms, and less social desirability bias are directly related to more delinquency. Professional's "anger with love" appears to be (directly) unrelated to delinquency. Age in this study also seems to be unrelated to delinquency.

The fourth (and fifth) column of Table 9.1 shows similar results to the correlations: gender and group norms are related to delinquency. In the next step, depicted in column six (and seven), the results suggest that, after entering social desirability, delinquency is no longer related to gender. This might imply that the relatively high delinquency scores among males might be due to a more pronounced social desirability bias among females. In the final step of the analyses, only the interaction between "professional's love" and "anger" was added to explain delinquency. The 3-way interaction does not appear to contribute to explaining delinquency, suggesting that the influence of professional's "anger with love" does not differ between participants who describe their peer group as more or less criminal. In order to be able to visually depict the professional's "anger with love" interaction effect on delinquency, an analysis of variance was conducted with contrast analyses, with delinquency as the dependent variable and median split variables of professional's "anger with love" as independent variables. The results of this analysis are depicted in Fig. 9.1. The contrast analyses reveal that only participants who scored "professional's love" low and "professional's anger" high reported a higher level of delin-

quency than other participants ($t(170) = 2.17, p < 0.05$). These participants reported a lower level of delinquency than participants who reported low “love” and low “anger,” $t(170) = 2.50, p < 0.05$, and also than participants who reported high “love” and high “anger.”

9.7.6 Summary

The results of this study suggest that professional’s “anger and love” is related to students’ self-rated delinquency. Delinquency was rated relatively high by participants who reported that the professional provided relatively little love and a lot of anger. Delinquency was relatively low among participants who reported to have received neither “anger nor love,” or to have received “anger with love.” As expected, delinquent peer group norms were related to self-reported delinquency. However, peer group norms did not moderate the relationship between “anger with love” and students’ delinquency.

9.8 General Discussion

Interventions aimed at preventing delinquency and recidivism among high-risk youths are generally set up and evaluated with a focus on “what works.” Not diminishing the importance of the content and design of such interventions, the current paper set out to investigate “who works.” More specifically, we examined high-risk youths’ perceptions about the degree to which the professionals with whom they are assigned provided “anger with love,” and whether this influenced the outcomes of such interventions. The results of the first study showed that high-risk youths do spontaneously mention the professional’s “anger with love” in interviews about their lives. This first study also finds some examples of high-risk youths relating “anger with love” to positive behavioral changes. The second study among a population of college students, who are generally assumed to be low-risk, suggests “anger with love” was negatively related to self-reported delinquent behavior. Thus far research on “who works,” with regard to interventions focused on “socializing” high-risk youths, is scarce. This is especially true for the concept “anger with love.” However, the results are in line with the findings regarding parenting; a combination of anger (demanding) and love (responsiveness) appears to be related to lower levels of antisocial behavior.

The current paper involved both a qualitative and a quantitative study. Using such mixed methods enables each method to compensate for inherent weaknesses of the other. A specific strength of this qualitative study is that the interviewers did not specifically ask about the role of professionals nor about “anger with love.” Therefore, having half of these high-risk youths naturally mention this concept appears to signify the importance of the interaction style. While this concept was

borne out in the data organically, this interview style also limited the depth of answers provided, as the respondents were not stimulated to further elaborate on their accounts. Another important strength of this qualitative study is that respondents were unmistakably part of the target group.

On the other hand, students in the second part of the study are generally not assumed to be part of the high-risk youth target group. However, as the results showed, none of the interaction-effects involving delinquent peer group norms were significant, while the results of the current study suggest that the relationship between “anger and love” and delinquency are equally applicable among members of non-delinquent and delinquent peer groups. In the second study, the questions involving the “professional” were about the university employee that was most important for them personally. It seems unlikely that a professional in such a position represents the most important adult with regard to the prevention of delinquent behavior. Despite this, the results of the present study do suggest that “anger and love” received from this professional are related to diminished levels of delinquency, like aggression and theft. An important advantage of the second study is that the method enabled researchers to study the relationship between the two primary concepts, anger and love, while also being able to correct for the influence of third variables. For instance, the second study shows that self-reported delinquency is related to susceptibility to social desirability bias; after correcting for this bias, the frequently reported relationship between gender and delinquency evaporated, suggesting this phenomenon in the criminological literature might actually be caused by differences between the genders in susceptibility to social pressures. Within criminological research, results seldom correct for social desirability bias. In the current study, the results regarding the relationship between “anger with love” and self-reported delinquency was not affected by social desirability.

The results of the present study do warrant future research with regard to the influence of professional’s “anger with love” on delinquency. In order to get a better grip on how “anger with love” is experienced by high-risk youths, in-depth inter-

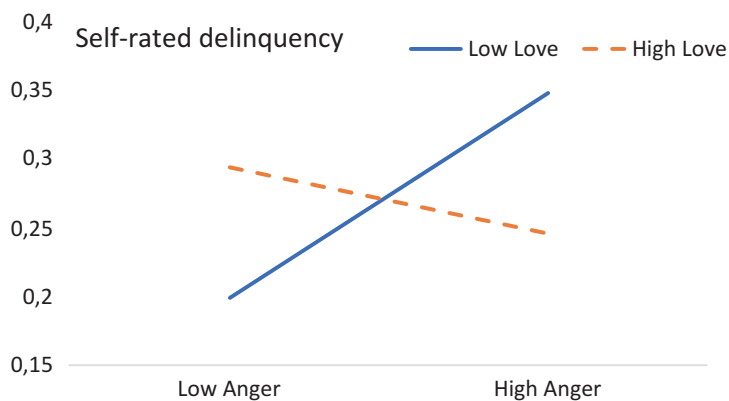


Fig. 9.1 Delinquency and professional’s love (low vs high) and anger (low vs high)

views specifically focused on high-risk youth perceptions about the behavior of professionals and their perceptions about “anger with love” should be conducted. Also whether the perception of “anger with love” might be negatively related to antisocial behavior should be quantitatively studied among the target group of high-risk youths, or at least a population closer to high-risk youths than students. Methodologically, the studies in this chapter do not permit attributions about causality. Therefore, longitudinal and experimental designs should be considered in order to find out if delinquency is indeed caused by the “anger with love” that is provided by professionals. Also, because self-reports about delinquency have found to be related to social desirability, future studies should either employ less sensitive measures of delinquency or correct for the influence of this bias.

The studies in this chapter provide some evidence to support the notion that including “who works” in the design of both interventions and research might prove fruitful. In the Netherlands, studies in this domain generally focus on “what works.” Municipalities are struggling to make choices between the different programs that claim to target high-risk youths, because it is unclear which of these programs will actually work in their situation. Including concepts like “anger with love” that relate to the behavior or the professional delivering the intervention might help provide a clearer picture about why some interventions prove successful, while similar others do not. Incorporating measurements of the target group member’s perceptions about the degree to which the professionals provide “anger with love” in evaluations of programs might contribute to a better understanding about why programs do or do not work. This might also prove true for scientific research on the topic. Such knowledge may be particularly helpful in the education and training of students into effective youth workers, the design of effective interventions, and constructing measurement tools that enable municipalities to monitor the work of professionals and their effectiveness.

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Chapter 10

New Meanings, New Communities, and New Identities?



Former Biker Gang Members Involved in Public Sharing of Life Experiences

Line Lerche Mørck, Katja Hartvig, and Cecilie Bildstedfelt

In this chapter, we focus on three cases in order to highlight different phases of identity transformation at 5, 10, and 20 years after gang involvement, respectively. We explore engagements in three types of dialogical practice. The first type is formers' engagements in critical collaborations for change; the second is presenting biographies and talks; and the third is the performing arts (theater and satire, for example). We view such dialogical practices as constitutive: developing new meanings, new identities, and new communities. However, due to fears of misrepresentation and safety concerns, former biker gang members have to navigate a highly complex web of risks when engaging in these so-called dialogical practices.

10.1 Introduction

Much research on gang desistance focuses on formal exit programs, former members' motivations for leaving, or the impact of push- and pull-factors or interventions on the disengagement process (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule Jr., 2014). In Denmark, some research has been done on the national exit program by the research office of the Danish Ministry of Justice (Pedersen, 2016), while a few publications have explored NGOs' use of boxing to support gang exit (Søgaard, Kolind, Thylstrup, & Deuchar, 2016; Deuchar, Søgaard, Kolind, Thylstrup, & Wells, 2016) or the Breathe Smart program (Deuchar, 2018; Mørck, 2016). However, in this chapter we want to direct attention to another kind of informal community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where former biker gang members initiate activities in order to make a difference by "making good" (Maruna, 2001).

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These informal communities of practice have emerged in Denmark during the last decade. They include new traditions for encouraging formers to participate and speak at seminars alongside those working professionally with gang exit and prevention. Increasingly, former biker gang members have been co-producing and taking part in various dialogical communities and becoming public voices, which includes the use of social media, radio, blogs, talks, and autobiographies to represent themselves and their stories and to share their perspectives on how crime prevention strategies and gang interventions can be improved.

What we find particularly interesting with regard to these informal communities produced by engagements in dialogical practices is how their activities, repertoires, and practice ideologies (Mørck et al., 2013) differ from the individualistic focus on “getting help with problems” that prevails in the Danish national exit program and many other formal interventions within the Danish welfare system. Such individualistic and problem-focused repertoires can lead to the formal exit program’s problematic reproductions of a repertoire where the “passive user” is positioned as in need of help and control, which, in turn, reproduces feelings of isolation, loneliness, and a conflict-ridden relation to the system (Mørck & Hansen, 2015). The position as passive user also clashes with formers’ (masculine) longing to “make good” (Maruna, 2001) by becoming resourceful and active agents (Mørck, 2016). In this light, we became interested in formers’ active and resourceful participation in the co-production of emerging communities of practice through their dialogical sharing of life experiences. We especially noticed how they form new, meaningful relations by actively engaging in something meaningful with others and by working with others around common interests (Mørck et al., 2013).

This chapter analyzes how former biker gang members¹ use self-representation and self-exposure as *dialogical practices* on diverse platforms where new informal communities of practice emerge. We explore how engagements in various types of dialogical practice may foster new meanings and support former biker gang members in forming a new identity as part of their exit process.

The concepts of dialogue, dialogicality/dialogism, and dialogical practices have been used in various Scandinavian and international research contexts within psychology, sociology, and anthropology to explore phenomena including teaching, research, and social work as dialogical processes (Olsson, 2014), and pedagogy and activity theory as dialogical fields (Roth, 2013). In this chapter, we draw on an understanding of dialogical practice as a form of practice involving dialogues that facilitate and encourage sharing and creating connections across positions and/or parties that usually have different (sometimes opposing) perspectives (Mørck et al., 2013). In this case, we are particularly interested in dialogical practices that involve former biker gang members sharing and creating dialogues with and connections to members of the general public, as well as social and judicial workers and other representatives of the established Danish welfare system (Mørck, 2016; Mørck et al., 2013). We focus on dialogical practices in Denmark, co-created with former biker gang members, where

¹In this chapter, we use the term “former biker gang member” when writing about a common category of both former street gang members and former biker gang members who were previously involved in the Danish “biker gang environment.”

formal and informal communities have emerged over the period from 2009 to 2019, in and across different platforms and contexts, where former biker gang members share and exchange life experiences. We will discuss possible benefits, such as social recognition and a new sense of belonging, as well as potential risks when former biker gang members share personal stories on diverse platforms and in various contexts. We explore these communities in relation to the following research questions:

- What kinds of experiences fuel identity formation among former biker gang members?
- What are the possibilities and obstacles for formers when changing identity? How and when are they able to consolidate a new identity where they are no longer seen as just, or first and foremost, a former gang member?
- Which dialogical activities and practices become ritualized within gang exit processes? What meanings and communities do they produce?
- How does dialogical practice generate emotional experiences conducive to passage, letting the former become something new as part of the gang exit process?

In other words, we want to contribute to a conceptualization of dialogical practice as a ritualized and self-engaged way of fueling gang desistance. We also want to explore how various types of dialogical practice have evolved historically in a specific societal context – the Danish context – that has undergone major changes over the last 20 years.

The chapter consists of different sections. The first section introduces the main concepts and analytical frameworks. This is followed by a section on methodology, and then the presentation of our analytical findings, outlining different types of dialogical practice and their significance as part of identity formation among three selected former biker gang members, respectively, positioned 5, 10, and 20 years after gang involvement – thereby marking different phases in the identity formation process.

10.2 Concepts and Analytical Frameworks – Studying Exit Processes and Dialogical Practices as Movements Beyond Liminality in a Danish Context

10.2.1 Studying Exit Processes from the Danish “Biker Gang Environment”

In the last decade, the term “biker gang environment” has become the most commonly used term in the Danish context when researchers, media, and police discuss gang conflicts, which often involve both street gangs and biker gangs in Denmark. We also use the term “biker gang environment” because, in our opinion, it is the most nuanced way to describe the Danish biker and gang environment, for several reasons. A growing number of gang members and biker gang members are switching alliance between groups; some become so-called “border jumpers” (Christensen & Mørck, 2017), shifting membership between biker gangs and street gangs. Many

new groups have emerged in Denmark: Some of them position themselves as international biker gangs where you can be a full member without driving a motorcycle – which is a new phenomenon in the Danish context. We also see street gangs adopting symbols familiar from biker gang culture (such as wearing back patches), becoming more hierarchical, and expanding their organization across different geographical areas of Denmark – some have even become international in their organization – all of which increase the similarities to the well-established international biker gangs (such as Hells Angels and Bandidos). The Danish state’s gang exit interventions and policies target members of both street gangs and biker gangs with the same means. They likewise use the term “biker gang environment” because the conflicts between groups most often involve both biker gangs and street gangs (Mørck et al., 2013).

10.2.2 *Research on Gang Exit*

The processes involved in leaving a gang have been researched using various terms and expressions, such as *gang disengagement processes* and *gang desistance* (Decker et al., 2014). These concepts point to different aspects of what it means to exit a gang and/or a gang lifestyle. The research on gang exit often points to the early and conflict-ridden processes of breaking with a gang environment and attempting to establish a new life without gang involvement. In this chapter, we will use the term *gang exit* (– *processes*) as a unifying term that entails the different aspects of the process of leaving a gang, including disengagement as well as desistance from gang activities. We will use the term to refer to both the preliminary/initial phases of leaving and the long-term efforts made by former biker gang members to distance themselves from their former gang involvement and lifestyle while simultaneously attempting to establish and maintain new and non-gang-categorized ways of living.

Gang exit is an area that has long been characterized by a severe lack of research, both in Denmark (Mørck, 2016) and internationally (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Recently, however, there has been an increase in studies researching gang exit programs, such as the American Homeboy Industries (Deuchar & Weide, 2018; Arocha, 2015), and in Denmark, the Comeback and Breathe Smart programs (Deuchar, 2018). One of the major topics in the research on these gang exit programs is how former gang members adapt their masculinity and move beyond so-called “hyper masculinity” (Søgaard et al., 2016). In relation to our research topic, these studies examine identity formation by researching how formers’ embodied identities change. This includes changes in terms of self-representation, such as clothing and hairstyle, but also values of being a good man and becoming a good breadwinner as a father and husband without committing crimes (Flores, 2016). Some of the research has also touched upon how participation in communities with other formers and common engagement in sharing and reflecting on feelings (Arocha, 2015), helping others (Mørck, 2016; Mørck & Hansen, 2015), boxing (Søgaard et al.,

2016), and spirituality or religion (Deuchar, 2018) produces new meanings and transforms identities.

Exit processes, gang desistance, or disengagement processes are also studied using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies asking former gang members about their lives and transitions. The American gang researchers Pyrooz and Decker (2011) have conducted a large number (84) of structured interviews among former gang members in prisons, analyzing motives for leaving gangs within a life course perspective. This research also touches upon the issue of moving from being a current gang member to a former and upon how no longer being identified as a gang member or former requires not only a long time, but also new social roles and cognitive shifts (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011, p. 7). However, their research mainly examines the motives for leaving a gang, focusing on conditions that make the gang environment less attractive to the individual member and that facilitate or accelerate the exit process (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). The further identity formation process of becoming something new is a topic in need of further research.

10.2.3 Identity Formation – Rituality and Mo(ve)ments Beyond Liminality

In this study, we also employ a form of life course perspective when we “follow persons,” researching their life trajectories in practice (Jefferson & Huniche, 2009). But where others have mainly explored the early phases of gang exit (up to a few years after exiting the gang), our contribution in this chapter is to better understand prolonged processes of identity formation after gang involvement. From the early phase where you in some contexts still are seen as a (former) gang member, to 5, 10, 20 years after leaving the gang environment. We explore the former biker gang members’ processes of becoming something new and finding new meanings and new communities where they feel they belong.

Leaving the Danish biker gang environment is often described as a major transition marked by a sense of liminality: You are no longer a gang member, but you still have to struggle very hard and for a very long time to become something new, to be recognized as something else in the new world you are entering (Mørck & Celosse-Andersen, 2019). You are in a zone of liminality, “betwixt and between” an “ordered universe” that is “no longer” and a new emerging reality that is “not yet” (Stenner, 2017, p. 22). In the analytical section below, we apply Stenner’s transdisciplinary theory of “liminality and experience” (2017) to analyze dialogical practices as emerging from a zone of liminality. Stenner understands liminality as a process of becoming: Liminality is about “*emergence in the sense of the becoming of new processes, forms, structures, patterns, experiences and entities that were previously not present*” (Stenner, 2017, p. 16).

Exit processes, understood as a zone of liminality, are characterized by transitions and movements between states, positions, systems, and disciplines, and as

“space/times” in which new forms are created and experimented with. According to Stenner, activities composing a ritual can vary enormously, including dressing differently and public speaking (Stenner, 2017, p. 24). In the analytical section, we analyze exit processes as rites of passage, as rituals and experiences: “*They are things we must go through. They are also things that mark and transform us: we are different when we come out the ‘other side’*” (Stenner, 2017, p. 24).

10.2.4 “Making Good” – Dialogical Practices as Rituals of Desistance and Transition

Maruna (2001) researched how ex-offenders reform and rebuild their lives. According to his research, ex-offenders who manage to desist successfully from crime often describe how they are striving to find a *higher sense of purpose*, and how they wish to achieve lasting accomplishments. This attitude of *generativity* includes a concern with, and commitment to, making contributions that will help the next generation; for many, this generative motivation seems able to fill a void, giving their lives new purpose after leaving crime behind.

Successful “desisters” from crime in Maruna’s study seemed to share the motivation and ambition that, even if they felt they had wasted their whole life, they could still put that wasted lifetime to use by saving others from making the same mistakes – in other words, by “making good” (Maruna, 2001). For Maruna, this became an umbrella term for all transformative processes and activities among successfully desisting ex-offenders.

Integrating Maruna’s findings with the concept of dialogical practices as activities in a zone of liminality, processes of making good can be seen as part of the typical transition process of formers. Activities focused on making good can likewise be said to have a ritual character, in the sense that there are certain practices and rites of passage that you have to go through to be seen as a (legitimate) former.

In the following section on methodology, we place these conceptual frameworks within a critical psychological, but also transdisciplinary, social practice research tradition (Jefferson & Huniche, 2009), continuing the research into formers’ identity formation in a Danish context conducted by Mørck and others among and with former gang members and former biker gang members (Mørck, 2014; Mørck & Celosse-Andersen, 2019; Mørck & Khawaja, *in press*).

10.3 Methodology: A Phenomenon-Driven Social Practice Ethnography Following Persons in Practice

We work with a *phenomenon-driven* (Huniche & Sørensen, 2019) *social practice research ethnography*, where we follow “*persons in practice*” (Jefferson & Huniche, 2009). Huniche & Sørensen argue that it is “*important for psychological science, at*

any step in the research process, to reflect on and adjust the way in which methods are involved with the phenomenon we come to know (cf. Stenner, 2017); that is, in constituting the phenomenon through the intra-action of subject matter and research methods” (Hunniche & Sørensen, 2019, p. 548).

In our research into formers’ identity transformations and “dialogical practices,” dialogical practices are simultaneously both the *phenomenon* we study and an integral part of *our research method*. When we “follow” “persons in practice” over time, in and across very different contexts and communities, we also follow the different kinds of emerging “dialogical practices” that the formers co-produce. This includes virtual communities, such as Facebook groups, where we all (both researchers and formers) are participants who are invited in and then communicate with one another. Through our common participation in these communicative networks, we also get *access* to the content of the dialogues, as well as an overview of the various kinds of dialogical practice whereby our co-researchers² represent themselves (this includes presentations at seminars, in books, and on television and radio programs (see Fig. 10.1)).

Our empirical material concerning the 10 formers was produced over a period of almost 10 years – the same decade where formers in Denmark have become engaged in new forms of dialogical practice as part of gang exit processes. This was a period where formers’ engagement in dialogical practices emerged and increased in and across many public platforms and settings, such as television, newspapers, social media, films, autobiographies, theater, and radio shows. As such, in a Danish context, the phenomena that we are studying have gone from being almost non-existent to being at the center of the emergence of a combined virtual and real-life community. This new community is reproduced in and across different contexts, including Danish (social) media contexts, dialogical gang seminars at Grundtvig’s People’s

	Presentations	Facebook	Media/press	Film	Books	Satire	Blogs/homepage
N1	x	x	x	x	(x)		x
N2	x	x	x	x			
N3	x						
N4	x	x		x			
N5	x	x	x	x	x	x	
N6	x	x	x	x	(x)	x	
N7	x	x	x	x			x
N8	x	x	x	x	x		
N9	x	x	x	x	x		
N10	x	x	x		x		

Fig. 10.1 Co-researchers’ engagements in dialogical practice

²We explain below in the paragraph on ethics what it means to be engaged as a co-researcher.

College,³ and a number of (gang) exit projects. As seen in Fig. 10.1, nine out of ten are very active participants in many forms of dialogical practices, and eight out of the 10 co-researchers engaged in dialogical gang seminars at Grundtvig's People's College, many of them for several years in a row.

In 2018, we chose the 10 formers among a broader group of formers who have participated as co-researchers in our various research projects over the last decade (see Fig. 10.2). The primary criterion for selection was their relevance in relation to the phenomenon of “dialogical practice.” Four of our research participants have had a crucial role in the building of these new communities, where dialogical practices have evolved. As such, research participants were not only selected because of their former involvement in the biker gang environment; they were also selected due to their position and their active engagement in producing (communities of) the dialogical practices that we are studying here.

As is common in practice research projects (Mørck et al., 2013; Mørck & Celosse-Andersen, 2019), we, as researchers, also participate as multi-positioned co-producers of the contexts where these dialogical practices have evolved. One of us, for example, has been a co-organizer and presenter at many of the gang seminars held at Grundtvig's People's College, and has also invited some of the formers to courses at the university and acted as co-presenter and co-discussant at paper presentations at international and national conferences and in the media (including radio, television, and social media). This 10-year history as a multi-positioned co-producer has supported the process of creating trust and gaining access to other

Co-researchers	Interviews	Participant observation	Publications
N1: Leading full member, biker gang	2	x	5 (2 English)
N2: Support & prospect, biker gang	2	x	3
N3: Leading member, street gang	5	x	4, (3 English, In prep.)
N4: Lower leading member, street gang	1	x	2 (1 English)
N5: Leading member, support group	1	x	3 (2 English)
N6: Support group member	1	x	1
N7: Peripheral par., leader criminal group	2	x	2 (1 English)
N8: Member, biker gang	2	x	1
N9: Peripheral participant, co-leader	3	x	5 (2 English)
N10: Full member, biker gang	1		1

Fig. 10.2 Former gang involvement and research involvement

³The Danish “Højskole” can be translated to “People's College.” There are 73 *Højskoler* in Denmark. *Grundtvigs Højskole* often involves students and other parties outside the college in community-building activities – discussing different societal problems (see Mørck et al., 2013). Danish *Højskoler* is an independent, alternative school for adults. It is a voluntary supplement to obligatory and traditional schooling, and the different colleges often have a specific focus. *Grundtvigs Højskole* is one of the oldest of its kind, and its main subjects include philosophy, art, politics, and journalism. In 2011, Eurogang also held its international meeting at *Grundtvigs Højskole* in the same week as the Danish gang seminar.

dialogical practice networks, including receiving invitations from other formers' closed groups and personal networks on Facebook:

"Ethnographic relations are built on trust, on the doing of trust (Jefferson, 2004) and on researchers being seen as having something relevant to offer. Trusting relationships are hard to formalise or agree upon in advance particularly if the researcher is a newcomer to the field with little or no prior contact." (Jefferson & Huniche, 2009, p. 22).

As mentioned above, one of the main contexts where we (together with formers) have engaged in dialogical practice is through gang seminars held at Grundtvig's People's College. Mørck et al. (2013) describe how, during the first 5 years they were held, these "dialogical meetings" involved *"more than 400 participants, including about 60 national and international keynote speakers and workshop organizers, in discussions about gang intervention, gang conflicts, and related issues"* (Mørck et al., 2013, p. 81). In line with our earlier research into the dialogical meetings at Grundtvig's People's College (Mørck et al., 2013), we have continued to conduct practice research with the formers, asking them for interviews and continuing dialogical exchanges in and across various new contexts where we meet them again.

In the first interview with each participant, they were formally invited to participate as co-researchers in our research projects, and it was at this point that we began to "follow" them as "persons in practice." Our previous encounters were treated as *background knowledge*, to be discussed in interviews and the new contexts of dialogical practice.

10.3.1 Co-researcher Ethics

As co-researchers, our participants read the parts of our presentations and publications that are about them personally and are invited to have their say in which parts of our dialogical exchanges (whether via Facebook, panels, seminars, presentations, or the media) are used as empirical data and published in research articles. This is very important due to the dilemma that, even though we use *pseudonyms* when presenting our research, some of the participants will be easily recognizable, because they are also public figures, sharing their stories in public debates on the radio and television, in newspapers, and via social media.

The handling of data in this study is approved by the data protection agency, at our university, Aarhus University. In terms of ethical issues, our work is aligned with other participatory approaches, such as Brotherton and Barrio's (2004) emancipatory goal of producing research that co-creates conditions for a dialogical relationship between researchers and research participants, thereby also contributing to the humanization of formers, and to social reform and social justice (Brotherton & Barrio 2004, p. 4). In our experience, the collaborative, multi-positional, and multi-contextual conditions that characterize our practice research help reproduce trust and openness in a field that in many other ways tends to be characterized by distrust (Deuchar 2015; Mørck, *in press*).

10.3.2 Mo(ve)ment Ethnography of Identity Formation: From a “Subject Standpoint and Perspective”

Within critical psychological practice research, the goal is to do research from a “subject standpoint” (Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). This involves not treating people as research objects; instead, through ongoing collaboration, the goal is to come to an understanding of first-person perspectives on subjects’ identity formation. Our emphasis on *mo(ve)ment ethnography*⁴ (Mørck & Celosse-Andersen, 2019) involves an ambition to explore “moments and movements” as they are produced in and across contexts and communities, and over time, as part of identity formation. Inspired by so-called “boundary community” social practice theory (Mørck, 2006), we have a special focus on *mo(ve)ments beyond* marginalization and the meanings of liminality, as well as on exploring the *significance of the communities* in which formers participate.

10.3.3 Backgrounds and Engagements of the Ten Research Participants

Our ten participants vary considerably in terms of their backgrounds, positions, and ways of participating in the biker gang environment. As we saw in Fig. 10.2, some have been involved as gang leaders at different levels, some have been members of groups supporting some of the major biker gangs, some have been full members of street gangs or biker gangs, and others have been more peripherally involved in the gang environment as part of criminal communities collaborating with biker gangs.

Our ten participants are listed in Fig. 10.3 along with their respective sources of support in the early stages of the exit process and their new positions in terms of education, family, and work after leaving the biker gang environment. Fig. 10.3 also includes indications of the things that contribute to a sense of meaning and purpose in life for each participant following their gang disengagement. As the figure shows, all our participants have actively engaged in helping others, and half of the formers have set up NGOs to help other formers establish a new network, meanings, and interests to create a new everyday life.

Five of our participants left the gang environment during the period 1998–2008. At this time, there was no formal Danish national exit program and no Danish NGOs working to help persons exit gangs. The majority of these early leavers state that

⁴Mo(ve)ment ethnography has been the main methodological approach in our earlier publications about identity formation and gang exit (Mørck, 2014; Mørck & Hansen, 2015; Mørck & Khawaja, [in press](#)) in relation to some of the formers whose stories, while not the main subject of this chapter, still serve as a background for comparison and discussion.

	Years since leaving	Support in the early stages of the exit process	Education	Being a good father	Starting up NGO	Volunt. social work	Paid social work
N1	5	National exit program = "counter-productive", NGO's	(University student)	x	x	x	x
N2	5	NGO's, People's College	Alternative education			x	x
N3	5	Family, religious community, legal psychiatry	Religious learning			x	
N4	5	People's College, NGO	(Apprentice)			x	x
N5	5	National exit program, NGO	Social worker student	(x)		x	x
N6	10	"No help", film job	Social worker student	x	x	x	x
N7	11	Anger management-person, People's College	Social work, university student		x	x	x
N8	11	Project Good Release = "no help"	Alternative education	x	x	x	x
N9	16	Family	University		x	x	x
N10	20	"On my own"	Social worker, alternative education	x	x	x	x

Fig. 10.3 Positions, support and meanings in life

they left the environment "on their own," with "no help" from the prison system. Only one of them emphasized help from his family, while another mentions help from a prison employee who continued to help him on a voluntary basis after he left prison.

Three of the five formers who left the Danish gang environment in 2013–2014 received an offer from the prison probationary services or the police to become part of the formal national exit program. Two of them accepted this offer and were assigned an exit coordinator, with very different – one good, one bad – experiences of this program.

10.4 The Struggle of Becoming and Movements Beyond Liminality

In this empirical-analytical section of the chapter, we introduce our three main participants, who we call Nabil, Simon, and Richard. Respectively 5, 10, and 20 years after gang involvement, their stories represent different phases in the process of establishing a new identity and moving beyond liminality. They have all managed to obtain new positions, engagements, and responsibilities in their everyday lives, moving from positions as a biker gang member and a former toward new and different positions. The three of them were selected as the main participants in this study because they have all been co-producers of different types of dialogical practice and shared experiences that are highly relevant to the discussion of the risks and benefits of self-exposure.

10.4.1 *Nabil (N5)*

As a public figure, Nabil was known as a former, radio host, student of pedagogy, and enthusiastic contributor to public debate. Among our main participants, Nabil was most recently disengaged from the gang environment (in 2013), which also made him more vulnerable. This vulnerability is something we have seen with all five of the participants who are currently 5–6 years into their transition away from the biker gang environment.

When it came to engaging as a former in dialogical practices related to gang prevention and crime prevention, Nabil presented himself as a “frontrunner” and “first-mover” in Denmark. He is the one in our sample who went the furthest in this endeavor, and who waited for the shortest period to engage in dialogical practices after leaving the gang environment. His confrontational and uncompromising approach was apparent in his public-facing activities: He was exposing gangs’ ways of operating and thinking, pushing, and sometimes crossing the boundaries of what gangs consider legitimate behavior by former members. He was acting in ways that can offend gangs, such as presenting himself with a new identity (as a journalist) when confronting current gang members as part of his radio program (Mørck, *in press*).

Sadly, Nabil is also the one who experienced the most serious consequences of challenging his former environment, as he was shot in the street 19 November 2018 and died shortly after. This fatal incident occurred just after he had attended a reception for his newly published autobiography.

For Nabil, being a former was still an important part of his identity and self-representation, and his appearance and image could in some ways be seen as reminiscent of that of a gang member. He also had other ways of presenting himself, but being in touch with his past was part of his public persona and something he consciously applied for specific purposes in specific situations. For example, while posing for a picture with the Minister of Justice and leader of the Danish Conservative Party, he jokingly and unexpectedly placed him in a staged “chokehold.” In general, Nabil’s public performances were characterized by his use of humor, personality, and charisma.

Another, less visible identity that Nabil did not mention in public was that of being a father: Nabil had a 6-year-old son, but was not seeing him.

10.4.2 *Simon (N6)*

Simon left the biker gang environment more than 10 years ago. Today, when he presents himself, he describes himself as a social worker with a big heart and a strong desire to help disadvantaged people – a commitment that stems from his own disadvantaged background. Simon describes one of his core skills as being able to talk with all kinds of people. When he decided to exit the biker gang environment, his social skills both helped him and motivated him toward working on projects with a crime prevention objective. Alongside a few other former biker gang

members, Simon established a Facebook group in 2017. The purpose of this group was to have a closed forum where members could discuss approaches to gang prevention while drawing on their personal experiences. The group's membership soon grew, and an idea emerged to write a book addressing topics of gang prevention. In order to carry out this project, other people with a personal or professional interest in preventive work and gangs were invited to join the group, including politicians, people with a background in the intelligence services or police, a mother who had lost her son due to gang shootings, and us as researchers.

Simon is also engaged in social and political initiatives in the city where he lives, and he recently organized an event addressing the growing opioid epidemic. Today, a fundamental aspect of Simon's identity is being a father with a large family: something he always dreamt of, but did not think was possible when he was in a biker gang. Simon's Facebook profile is characterized by posts about initiatives in his local community or photos of him as a loving father and husband. These photos are often accompanied by a humoristic comment which draws on the stark contrast to Simon's previous lifestyle, such as referring to "having a black belt in wild after-parties" as his forte when he posts a photo of himself comforting his baby daughter in the early hours of the morning.

10.4.3 Richard (N10)

Of our participants, Richard is the one who has been away from the criminal environment for the longest period (20 years). Richard identifies publicly as a mentor, pedagogue, father of three, and public debater.

A prominent part of Richard's self-representation is his identification as a representative for people who have been able to break down barriers in terms of social heritage – in Scandinavia sometimes referred to as "pattern breaker." This position of having endured, and broken free from, a socially and economically vulnerable background is one that Richard identifies with, and is identified with in the eyes of the public. This is apparent, for instance, in the title of his autobiography: *From Brotherhood to Pattern Breaker* (translated from Danish), published April 2018.

Compared to our other participants, Richard's public self-representation has a more serious, profound, and emotional feel and character, and he often uses his public appearances to encourage improvement of governmental and social work practices when it comes to vulnerable groups in society.

10.4.4 Transitional Phases: Former, "Betwixt and Between," and Consolidation of New Identities

From our interviews with formers, we found that transitioning to new positions, identities, and self-representations through participation in dialogical practices can be associated with various challenges and obstacles. It can be intimidating for the

formers to present themselves to members of the public, whether in the form of an audience, listeners, viewers, or readers, when they feel that there is a lot at stake – and that they have something to prove. Richard described feeling very nervous the first time he appeared on national television:

So I was actually, frankly speaking, about to shit my pants. I was very nervous all day. I don't even think I ate anything. Because one thing is to go on TV, which I think would make most people nervous, but then add in that I had to be ME, with the history I have. (Richard)

For another participant, Nabil, the anxiety was also tied to a concern about performing for “an audience *like you*.” The “you” in Nabil’s case referred to persons who are of Danish ethnicity, have no criminal record, and are likely well educated.

In any case, the anxiety was related to the period immediately before the performance, whereas the completion of a performance gave a sense of relief. Our co-researchers mentioned how much audience reactions – often in the form of applause, compliments and sometimes even hugs – meant to them. The relief and the positive reactions were furthermore described as the reason for continuing to give talks and performances despite the initial anxiety.

It also became apparent to us that becoming something new and transitioning past being perceived only as a former can be a difficult and stressful experience. The participants expressed that, to succeed, they needed to be intensely dedicated and to commit a lot of their time to the endeavor. Relevant exposure, relevant opportunities for self-representation, and connection to relevant communities are needed if they are to move toward becoming something more than a former.

We also found that it takes a long time, likely several years after having left the biker gang environment, before the formers can gain recognition in a(ny) position that is not directly related to their status as a former biker gang member. The status of former is a sticky position where you are likely to sometimes be demonized in the eyes of others, who may act as if you were still an active gang member.

Interestingly, we have seen that the label as “a former” seems to stick more to some groups than others. Particularly sticky features and positions in a Danish context seem to include not being a Danish citizen (3),⁵ identifying as Muslim (1), having suffered or suffering from a mental disorder of any kind (about 7), having had a (middle) leading position in the biker gang environment (6), and displaying certain features in terms of appearance. The appearance features may include dark skin, muscular physique, tattoos (especially face or neck tattoos), speaking in ways that resemble “gangsta speak” or any form of “ghetto dialect,” and walking with a gangster-like “swagger.” In the experience of one of our main participants, Simon, prejudices about former gang members often involve being seen as unintelligent, uneducated, ignorant, or primitive.

One way in which we started to notice different transitional phases among the formers was through their self-representations when participating in our research. In our interviews, we initially asked our co-researchers to present themselves to us

⁵The numbers in parentheses refer to how many of the ten participants in our sample belong to the mentioned categories.

as if we did not know who they were. We found variations in the degree to which they mentioned their history of gang involvement, seemingly exponentially related to the amount of time that had passed since they left the biker gang environment. From our interviews, identification and status as a former appears to be prominent in their self-representations for the first years after leaving the gang. As time passes, they gradually identify less and less as being a former when describing themselves and more according to other engagements in their lives.

The lengthy process of transformation is illustrated in the following figure (with self-descriptions highlighted in bold):

The quotes in Fig. 10.4 resemble a conceptualization of three stages that exist in a liminal transition. Stenner (2017) borrowed these stages from the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's descriptions of *rites of passage* in order to dissect the concept of liminality. We understand these stages as transitional phases in the process of moving beyond liminality. The first phase is related to separation, where "*the previous state or social position is, as it were, broken down*" (Stenner, 2017, p. 62). The final phase can be described as a phase of incorporation, where a new status, position, or identity is consolidated. From this perspective, liminality is the middle phase: a condition of "*being in the process of crossing a threshold (i.e. of becoming)*" (Stenner, 2017, p. 62).

Employing this perspective, the three transitional phases can be seen in different ways in the three quotes. Nabil is still in the process of breaking down his former identity as a gang member by introducing the word "former." The gang identity from his previous life is still articulated as part of his self-presentation: He mentions his position as a gang leader and highlights that he was part of the gang environment

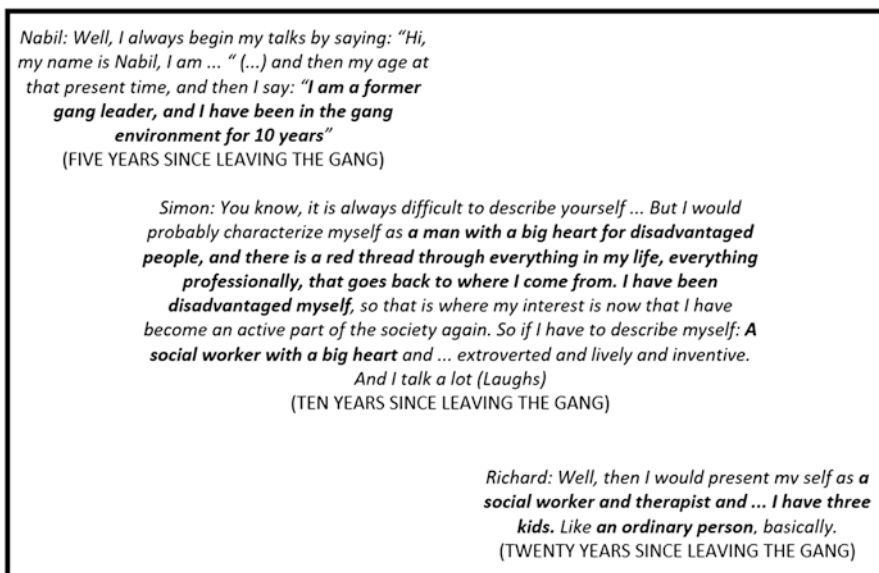


Fig. 10.4 Self-presentations by Nabil, Simon, and Richard

for ten years. Simon displays in his self-presentation a certain *wavering between worlds*: He uses a new title that does not point back to his past, namely, the title of “social worker,” but packs this new title in between many self-descriptions that can explain – or even validate – this (choice of) title, personally as well as professionally. Finally, Richard seems to have consolidated a new identity and new titles as social worker, therapist, and father but nevertheless feels the inclination (or need?) to point out the “ordinariness” of his self-presentation; a feature that is somewhat notable, even remarkable, for someone who knows of his past.

10.5 Forms of Dialogical Practice – Performance, Meanings, and Ritual Passage

The engagements in dialogical practices by the formers we have interviewed have taken various forms, included different activities, and have been considered meaningful in different ways. In this section, we will describe the different forms, activities, and meanings of the formers’ engagements using concepts related to liminality as a framework, with specific attention to rituals and their functions in the processes of transition.

We have identified three types of dialogical practice facilitative of transitions, community building, and movements beyond liminality, which are productive in different ways. The first type of practice is *engaging in critical collaborations for change*; the second is *writing autobiographies and giving talks and keynote speeches*; and the third is the *performing arts*.

10.5.1 Critical Collaborations for Change

We use the term “critical collaborations for change” to refer to contexts where formers engage in different kinds of collaboration with others (individuals or groups) with a purpose of intervening in, or drawing attention to, areas or contexts that call for societal and social change or action. As mentioned in the presentation of the study’s conceptual framework and methodological approach, one of the main contexts for engaging in critical collaborations for change in Denmark has been through gang and radicalization seminars held at Grundtvig’s People’s College (Mørck et al., 2013) during the period 2008–2018.

The two formers who had the original idea for the seminars, one of whom has been the main organizer, are among the formers we have followed. A total of eight out of our ten participating formers have given keynotes at these seminars, and five of them have been involved in presenting their life stories or talking about social work, gang criminality, and radicalization during courses for students. Indeed, two of them have themselves been students at the college. During seminars, courses, and

presentations, many of the formers added each other on Facebook, and in some cases, organizers also mediated contact to journalists, thereby helping to facilitate the sharing of formers' life experiences in Danish media outlets, such as radio and television. These dialogical seminars have co-produced a new community of formers and others who critically discuss policy and gang exit and intervention programs, which emerged during the same period in Denmark.

A common goal was to contribute to the development of new approaches to gang prevention and gang exit in and outside prison. Other topics have been how religion or spirituality have made a difference.

Simon, one of the main participants in this chapter, was one of the three formers who started the Facebook group. As one of the group's moderators, he invited us to join, alongside other researchers, other formers, a mother who lost her son to gang violence, and other debaters and entrepreneurs in the field of gang intervention. Simon attended the gang and radicalization seminars for a couple of years, becoming part of the community. There is an overlap between the multi-positioned people and communities engaged in the gang and radicalization seminars and Facebook group and those engaged in other public debates about gang policy, gang prevention, and gang exit.

As seen in the case of Simon, launching a group on Facebook to work on a book project opened the door to collaboration with a diverse array of people and professions, creating new relations and new knowledge within a field of research.

Social media has made it possible to get in touch with people that otherwise would not get a chance to meet. The Facebook group is an example of how *working for a specific cause* can bring together people from very different positions in society. Even though such collaborations may foster new meaningful relations, they can also cause conflicts due to the differences between those involved. At one point, the divide between some of the polarized positions in the Facebook group became too wide, and the group's most active members— including Simon — took charge and expelled a lot of members from the group. The Facebook group constitutes an example of a community-building practice where a new community is built from scratch. Thus, it is a fragile community, which demands a lot of time and effort to generate enough activity for the community to survive.

10.5.2 Biographies and Keynote Talks

Helping to write biographies and giving talks on personal life experiences are another example of a way for formers to cope and move forward in the zone of liminality by engaging in dialogical practices. Of our ten participants, four have published biographies, and one is currently preparing a biography. The main topics we have identified in the stories they tell concern childhood, experiences at school and/or youth clubs, criminal and biker gang environments, the exit process, how to improve preventive or exit programs, and the need for change in various areas of society.

Two other practices likewise involving the sharing of personal experiences were common and frequent activities among all the formers we interviewed: doing interviews for TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines; and giving talks and presentations for educational, general-informative, and crime-preventive purposes. For Richard, the activity of having his personal life story written and published as a biography, and afterward giving talks and interviews about his story and the book, seemed to have a major impact. Richard's biography tells the story of how he exited the biker gang environment, ended his criminal career, spent time in prison, got an education, and went on to lead a more regular and law-abiding life employed in the social work sector. The specific ways in which he worked to edit and influence the content and structure of the biography were shaped by his professional ambitions within the fields of social work and therapy.

The sense of meaning that arose from publishing his biography, and later from giving talks about it, was rooted in a wider agenda of promoting general social awareness for Richard. He was initially motivated to work on a biography by others telling him that his development beyond gang involvement was an extraordinary and impressive achievement, and that he should share his story in order to inspire others. However, Richard also described how he found it quite difficult to participate in the production of his biography, since this work reopened old emotional wounds. This was because he had to seek out various people from his upbringing and from his previous criminal life in order to get important details of his story right, which, for various reasons, was an emotionally challenging and draining endeavor. At the same time, working on the book was also a route to personal development and a source of important insights for Richard, and the process has made him more knowledgeable of himself in a number of helpful ways.

10.5.3 *The Performing Arts*

Engaging in cultural productions, such as art and performance, can be seen as a way to navigate and create meaning in experiences of liminality and feelings of being in a liminal zone. In our sample, we have seen formers performing and acting in movies, TV-series, radio satire, and theatre. Production of art and performance of rituals can be seen as liminal experiences in and of themselves: As cultural productions, art and rituals can “*contribute a sense of importance (the extra-ordinary) to be woven into the matter of fact of ordinary practice*” (Stenner, 2017, p. 30). Looking at cultural productions such as theatre, paintings, and religious rituals as reflections of *liminal worlds-between-worlds*, the use and performance of such rituals, and artistic performances and productions, can be seen as “*liminal affective technologies for fabulating and navigating liminal experience ‘betwixt and between’ worlds*” (Stenner, 2017, p. 30).

For Nabil, acting and comedy were meaningful activities in terms of both coping with liminality and moving toward becoming something else. He was engaged in satirical theater and as an actor in a Danish crime-thriller TV-show, in both cases

portraying a gang(ster)-type persona. Nabil also highly valued his participation – and later employment as host – in a radio show about the activities of the Danish police and covering relevant themes and current tendencies concerning crime in Denmark. Here, he represented the views of gangs and gang members by analyzing gang news and describing the inner logics and interests of the gangs based on his own experiences in and with gangs.

What Nabil enjoyed about acting and doing comedy was the chance to play around with various identities or sides of himself, offering a break from the challenges he faced in his everyday life. Acting also served as an outlet for his old ways of being, back when he was a gang member – a side of himself he said he sometimes missed – through a legitimate activity, where he could also provide the audience with an insight into his former criminal world. Finally, he enjoyed surprising the audience with the striking contrast between the characters he portrayed and the person he had in fact become. He found this satisfying for three reasons: He thought the audience might learn to be careful not to judge others too quickly; he liked to provoke or shock and tease the audience; and he enjoyed seeing them pleasantly surprised by the civilized person he had become.

The depiction of the dialogical practices as parts of processes of ritual passage highlights some common challenges formers experience. Most of the identified challenges are tied to an important common goal for the formers: To be *acknowledged* and *included* as *legitimate* representatives by the community of practice of formers and others engaged in prevention practices in Denmark.

10.6 Possibilities of Engagement in Dialogical Practice

The possibility of social recognition is what motivates our co-researchers to continue to engage in dialogical practices. Nissen (2012, p. 169) defines recognition as: “(...) *the objectification of the other as subject, within a cultural form of participation and, thus, within a collective.*” When formers engage in dialogical practices and become an active voice in public debate, they are objectified as subjects and as having agency. Creating a product such as a book, presentation, or performance is furthermore a consolidation of this identity transformation, and when people praise the product, they are also recognizing the transformation (Mørck & Hansen, 2015).

In line with Maruna’s findings, our participants articulate the dialogical practices we explore in this chapter as ways of “making good.” These making-good dialogical practices, reflecting a desire to make a positive difference, are contrasted to other kinds of publications and forms of media participation, which are presented as “just for the money” or “to become famous.”

Recognition is not only tied to the products of dialogical practices, but also to the creation of new relations and feelings of belonging within new communities. The metaphor of the lone wolf is often used among former biker gang members in order to describe how they, willingly or not, have a somewhat isolated lifestyle after leaving the biker gang environment. However, in the interviews, the formers talked of

openings for establishing relations to communities that can offer support and guidance regarding the complexity of participating in dialogical practices, for instance, advising how to express oneself in the media and who to respond to. In our research, this is reflected in how Nabil felt a sense of belonging and protectiveness in relation to the journalist community, how Simon connects with the Facebook group, and how Richard develops a special bond with the co-author of his biography. Another common practice among our sample of formers is to take part in spiritual and religious communities, which give their everyday life meaning beyond biker gang involvement (Deuchar, 2018; Mørck & Khawaja, [in press](#)).

10.7 The Potential Risks of Formers' Engagement in Dialogical Practice

Engaging in dialogical practices and public representation through self-exposure is not without risk as a former biker gang member. Putting oneself on public display might lead to social recognition for one's work and development, but at the same time, it makes one very visible and vulnerable to critique. This visibility entails a concern about reactions from the biker gang environment. The formers we have been working with pay very careful attention in terms of which topics to talk about in public. This includes care to speak on behalf of oneself and to dissociate oneself as much as possible from one's former biker gang to avoid conflicts.

As a former biker gang member talking in public about your history and ideas for gang prevention, your existence is in many ways in opposition to the gangs. In terms of safety, there are things you cannot do or say about the former gang; for Nabil, however, it was a matter of standing up for yourself even though your actions might provoke others. He was willing to take things a step further than the other formers we have been working with. It was pivotal for him that he did not respond to threats from his former biker gang environment, and that he felt free to say what he wanted. This could be related to the fact that Nabil became part of a journalist community due to his employment at a radio station – a new identity that he had to protect, stand up for, and reproduce. Moreover, Nabil did not have the same responsibilities as a father as Simon and Richard, which might be why he was more inclined toward provoking the biker gang environment and willing to take more risks.

Sometimes this careful attention to self-exposure seems like balancing on a razor's edge, and our co-researchers are very concerned about the risk of misrepresentation. They have to avoid being perceived as a threat by their old biker gang, while at the same time displaying their sincerity, humility, and utility to the general public. As such, the margin of error is very narrow. The formers we have been working with have often talked about the implicit ground rules for how to present oneself as a former gang member. A biography cannot be too sensationalist and must not glorify or idealize gang culture. Notions of being a gangster or bragging about a

certain type of lifestyle are discarded as wrong ways of being a former biker gang member. As Richard mentions:

It was very important for me not to be compared to (...) others who have written a biker gang book, because there are no reflections. They are all ... Everybody just thinks that they are stupid, and they are still superheroes, and they have been ... All of that. And it is completely useless to me. (Richard)

According to Richard, you cannot maintain an identity as a “tough guy” if you want to prevent future generations from making the same mistakes. You have to deal with difficult emotions through reflection, which often involves revealing one’s weaknesses to the outside world. In the interest of “making good” (Maruna, 2001), it is necessary to move beyond the hyper-masculinity that is often inherent to the biker gang environment. Thus, when taking part in dialogical practices, the formers have to develop a new and broader type of masculinity in order to obtain a position as a nuanced and authentic human being.

Similarly, writing a book for financial reasons appears to be seen as a less legitimate way of participating in dialogic practices:

And I believe that some people are driven by financial motives. “Okay, now I’ve been this, and now I have to do something else. Okay, I can make money by telling my story, so that’s what I’ll do.” I am not at all driven by financial motives. I don’t care if I get paid for it. Because my money, I’ll earn them elsewhere. I’m perfectly aware that when this book is published, it will get offered some talks – I’m not stupid. (Simon)

Likewise, some of the narratives presented in biographies are seen as sincerer than others:

But I just think it is a glorification ... That just because you got your fingers burned, then you write a book about the whole community being shit and that the brotherhood is not as strong as you’d think from the outside - and I actually see it as something done for personal gain. (Simon)

Simon’s description of some people’s attempts to glorify stories of the *rise and fall* of former biker gang members emphasizes the importance of a certain authenticity when participating in dialogical practices through self-exposure. This kind of authenticity is related to Maruna’s (2001) notion of *hyper-morality*: The feeling of having to work extra hard or be extra righteous in order to make up for past deeds. These criteria of authenticity, or at least keeping financial interests separate from one’s dialogical practices, might be an obstacle for some former biker gang members who are not as well established as Simon. It can be difficult to find the energy to do a lot of unpaid voluntary work if you are struggling to find a job or earn enough money to support yourself – a struggle which can be very urgent for formers, since they often owe the government money due to the costs associated with legal proceedings and imprisonment.

Moreover, formers who engage in dialogical practices related to crime prevention too soon after exiting a biker gang often find their integrity and motives questioned. The aspect of *timing* when participating in dialogical practices is therefore important – both for practical financial reasons and due to the importance of authenticity.

10.7.1 Negotiating Conflicts of Interests

In our experience, the formers we have been working with have been very capable of managing this highly complex set of concerns related to the risks when taking part in dialogical practices. However, things become more complicated when other organizations or stakeholders take charge of the content and form of products of dialogical practices without any perception of, or experience with, the risks entailed. One example is film producers or journalists who are interested in a particular type of story – typically in providing “a peek into the glamorous/dangerous world of biker gangs.” One of the formers told us about the conflictual negotiations that took place when presenting his life story. He experienced a need to demand that if a journalist presents you as a former gang member, they must also represent what you are doing now (including the “making good” of the NGO you run, etc.).

After Nabil’s death, greater attention has been paid to the risks involved in former gang members becoming public figures. The Minister of Justice has been approached by various politicians who want the government to take measures to ensure the safety of formers who publish biographies and participate in public debates. He has responded that the ministry will arrange a review of social media once every six months to see if there are any threats and that they will ask former gang members actively engaged in dialogical practice whether they are being threatened. We know of one of our ten formers that has been contacted by his former exit coordinator and asked about threats. We have also heard about a publisher that has begun to take more security precautions and to give greater consideration to how and what they publish about the biker gang environment so as to ensure that formers are not subjected to the same dangers that Nabil fell victim to.

10.8 Conclusion

It can be a difficult endeavor for a former biker gang member to present himself to members of the general public, and it can be a struggle to try to become someone else and move beyond a liminal transition zone. The road leading to a meaningful transformation is long and narrow, and self-identification as a former biker gang member is a key element in ex-members or formers’ presentations of themselves for a number of years after leaving a biker gang environment. The central challenge for formers can be summed up as the pursuit of recognition, from oneself as well as from others and society as a whole, as something new and something other than a former biker gang member. For a community, activity or engagement to play a significant part in the transition away from a gang lifestyle, it has to be attainable, have a high level of meaningfulness, and include opportunities for belonging and recognition in order to fill out the void that the identity of being a biker gang member has left.

We have found that the activities of engaging in critical collaborations for change, presenting biographies and talks, and engaging in the performing arts are representative types for most of the public dialogical practices that formers engage in, and that such practices can constitute a rite of passage in the context of an exit process. These practices can create emotional experiences facilitating transition in the sense that engaging in them can provide the former with a sense of validation, connection, pride, belonging, meaning, and purpose, with new insights, and with the feeling that they are making up for past wrongdoings.

Experiences that can fuel new identity formation are characterized by the availability of a new position that is legitimate in the eyes of the public, the former biker gang, and – crucially – the community of other former biker gang members who engage in public sharing of life stories (as well as those they collaborate with). To feel you have obtained a new position includes feeling part of relevant communities and circles where you can become something new, developing a new identity that is approved by both yourself and others, and having access to new everyday practices and conditions that are meaningful and that allow you to provide for yourself.

Engaging in dialogical practices can provide opportunities for new belonging, new meaning, new purpose, and new identities. However, the former must also tread carefully and cautiously since he can encounter risks and obstacles in terms of threats and violent reactions from his former environment, narrow boundaries for legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the community of formers, and the conflicting interests of media representatives and stakeholders that call for complex strategic negotiations.

Under the right conditions, dialogical practices can be highly significant and mark the first steps towards doing and becoming something and someone else, disengaged from the biker gang environment. At the same time, how witnesses and audiences acknowledge and react to the former gang member's engagements in dialogical practices can contribute in essential ways to the approval and acceptance of his transformation, in turn providing opportunities for further movements away from gang membership. Finally, dialogical practices can also provide possibilities for creating or becoming part of communities that are “making good” *together* – and that, as the various examples we have presented from the Danish context have shown, may sometimes contribute significantly to positive societal change.

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Chapter 11

The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Disengagement from Gangs



Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz

Disengagement from crime groups and its corresponding process, desistance from crime and delinquency, are not well understood. The two processes are related yet distinct. In the case of disengagement, ties are cut to groups and individuals and time spent with those groups is reduced if not eliminated. Desistance from crime, however, involves a reduction or cessation in criminal behavior; it is conditioned by embeddedness within a crime group. More embedded individuals are likely to have greater difficulty breaking away from the grip of the group. Criminology is replete with studies of group joining and the onset of criminal behavior. There has been a recent surge of interest in understanding how individuals come to leave groups that engage in crime.

Disengaging from groups involved in crime can be a difficult process owing to the group processes and ties among individuals in such groups. While individuals engaged in traditional forms of street crime (robbery, burglary, drug selling, etc.) offend in groups, these groups lack persistence and structure and generate limited loyalty among their participants. Separating from such groups is generally less problematic. However, disengaging from groups with more persistence and structure, such as gangs, can pose challenges. Such groups generate relationships and dependence among their members that make disentangling oneself from them considerably more complicated. Departures have been characterized as “sharp” when individuals knife off from their group suddenly. Such departures are often sparked by a notable incident such as being a victim of crime or vicariously experiencing crime through the victimization of a friend or loved one. Other departures are more gradual, following a process of initial doubts about continuing membership that are

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C. Melde, F. Weerman (eds.), *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47214-6_11

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reinforced over time (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule Jr., 2014; Densley & Pyrooz, 2019; Ebaugh, 1988).

Despite a surge of interest in disengagement, the exit process is not well understood (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). This is particularly true for our understanding of how gang members come to leave their gang and forge new identities. The creation and maintenance of new identities as an “ex” (Ebaugh, 1988) is important for understanding disengagement from gangs as well as terror groups, organized crime, and religious cults. Creating a new identity can be accomplished through the creation of “scripts” or narratives (Maruna, 2011). Such narratives often include a new conception of self or new worldview. In some cases, this is accomplished through adopting a religious transformation or more spiritual view of one’s self. The role of identity in offending and group membership is not a new research topic; however, its application to gangs is underdeveloped and is something the extant literature on gangs and disengagement has alluded to but is not formally tested (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Carson et al., 2013; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule Jr., 2014; Flores, 2013, 2016; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Pyrooz and Decker (2011) demonstrate the role of “pushes” and “pulls” that may lead to gang leaving. Pushes are external forces, typically of a negative character such as direct experiences with violence that make gang membership look less attractive. Pulls represent external attractions such as family or employment that “compete” with the attractions of gang life. Such attractions may serve to create alternative identities and activity that can lead to gang desistance. The balance between the lure of gang life and alternatives is variable, and is affected by multiple factors including identity, opportunity, and social ties. The temporal ordering of pushes and pulls is also important, as some may lead to decisions to cut ties while others may help confirm a decision already made.

In this paper, we examine the role of religion and spirituality in the creation of new identities among former gang members as they move away from their gang. We distinguish between religion and spirituality, a distinction supported in the literature (Loomis, 2019; Maton, 1989). Religion is the manifestations of the traditions and formal practice of a faith. It includes such things as attendance at church service, singing, “call and response” and other external signs of participation in ritual activity. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a more personal, internalized set of beliefs. This is a distinction common in studies of faith. Drawing on data from the LoneStar Project, or the Texas Study of Trajectories, Associations, and Reentry, a representative sample of 802 inmates preparing for release from state prison, we examine disengagement among the 140 current gang members and 301 former gang members in the sample. First, we examine the role of motives for leaving the gang and methods of leaving that have a religious component based on semi-structured interview data. Second, we compare current and former gang members on multiple measures of religiosity and spirituality, including beliefs, practices, fundamentalism, religious group identification, and religious routines. Finally, we examine the association between the aforementioned religious and spirituality measures and the temporal proximity to leaving a gang. Although our primary contribution to the Eurogang program of research is to advance disengagement scholarship in an area where we still know so little about gangs, it is also important to recognize the emergence of faith-based initiatives at the

turn of the century in the United States and long-standing involvement of religious groups in prison ministries and re-entry. We know little about how individuals in prison receive and react to such efforts despite emerging research in a global context (Deuchar, Morck, Matemba, McLean, & Riaz, 2016).

11.1 Religion and Crime

Religion and spirituality play an important role in shaping the behavior of groups and individuals, often providing increased solidarity and motivation to their members (Neuberg et al., 2013). The role of religious belief and participation has been highlighted in the human services professions. This is particularly true of social work. Lietz and Hodge (2011) note that spirituality plays an especially important role in family reunification efforts. Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell, and Smith (2015) found that long-term drug-involved offenders find considerable respite from their addiction-related troubles through spirituality and religious involvement. In a related vein, Pardini, Plante, Sherman, and Stump (2000) observed considerable benefits from religious faith and spirituality in substance abuse recovery. Support for the role of effective religious or spiritual interventions also exists for cancer patients (Ringdal, 1996) and clinical depression (Murphy et al., 2000).

Criminologists have examined the relationship between religion, spirituality, and crime. Indeed, one of the core theories of criminal behavior – control theory – includes belief as a central force in promoting conformity. Hirschi (1969) identified beliefs as a key element of the social bonds that promote behavior that corresponds with social norms. While belief in the moral order of society need not be religious in content, faith and spirituality are certainly recognized as elements of such bonds. However, Hirschi and Stark (1969) found no deterrent effect of religion on delinquency. Their focus was on the effect of religious “rewards” and “punishments” on behavior. Belief in the rewards of an afterlife or punishment for wrongdoing did not alter behavioral choices in their study. Johnson (2012) examined the role of religion in crime across dozens of studies and concluded that while not a root cause of crime, religion had an important role to play in crafting effective responses to crime. He identified a role for formal religious practices (attending church, being part of a congregation or faith community) as well as faith-based practices that extended beyond the more formal trappings of church and formal religious practice. Such activities include outreach, community engagement, and partnerships with individuals engaged in crime or at risk for such behavior. Roman, Whitby, Zweig, and Rico (2004) reviewed the relationship between religion and crime and noted there has been little support for a direct relationship between religion and crime, though they do note the unanticipated finding that the religiosity of parents was related to serious delinquency in boys in studies using representative data. This “perverse” finding was replicated in the Topalli, Brezina, and Bernhardt (2012) work conducted among hard core offenders. They concluded that this unexpected relationship – stronger religious beliefs were associated with more crime – was a consequence of fatalism

among members of the sample, who despite their belief in an afterlife and punishment for sinning saw so little of a future that such rewards or punishment had no impact on behavior.

Roman et al. (2004) concluded that the study of the relationship between religion and crime/delinquency has been hindered by problems in measurement, failure to specify important differences between religions and generations as well as the use of cross-sectional data that hinder the ability to identify causes and effects. They bring a similar critical eye to the literature on faith-based interventions and note: "...to date, it remains unclear whether religious based interventions are as efficient or more successful than secular interventions" (p. 16). They cite the failure to employ rigorous evaluation designs as one impediment to being able to draw more fully a set of conclusions about the impact of such interventions. They do observe from their review of the literature, however, that faith-based programming has been in existence in the criminal justice system for quite some time. Their systematic review is complemented by the more recent work of Adamczyk, Freilich, and Kim (2017). Of particular relevance, they note that theories of social control, social learning, and moral communities have enjoyed the most empirical support in the literature. While not a direct test of our approach, there is consistency between their review and our findings.

11.2 Religion and Crime Groups

There is not a solid body of research findings that document the effect, if any, of religion on desistance from crime and departures from crime groups. Among the few direct studies of this process, Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, and Seffrin (2008) used a life course perspective to examine "hooks for change." While the quantitative results did not find an effect for religion (i.e., formal practices) on desistance from crime, in qualitative interviews subjects identified that spirituality (spiritual beliefs) did play a role in such decisions. Drawing on this work, Veysey and her colleagues (2013: 246) identified four "mechanisms" that spirituality worked through as a hook for change, including: (1) a form of social capital (opportunities), (2) religious teachings that encourage pro-social behavior, (3) as resources for emotional coping, and (4) by providing opportunities to build pro-social relationships. This is a useful framework to use in conceptualizing how spirituality can assist with the desistance process and one with important policy implications.

There has been little attention to the role of religion and spirituality among criminologists who study gangs in the United States. A 2013 publication by the National Gang Center and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) titled, "Getting out of Gangs, Staying out of Gangs" makes no mention of these topics. This is ironic as OJJDP funded a series of such interventions during the George W. Bush administration and provides training in such initiatives (OJJDP, 2016). Another OJJDP paper titled, "How to Help Me Get Out of a Gang: Youth Recommendations to Family, School, Community and Law Enforcement Systems"

(Sharkey, Stifel, & Mayworm, 2015), similarly makes no mention of religion or spirituality. The role of clergy is recognized in leading approaches to intervene in gang and group violence (e.g., Skogan, Hartnett, Bump, & Dubois, 2008), although that role is rarely isolated in process and impact evaluations of these strategies. In a comprehensive review of the literature on gang disengagement (Carson & Vecchio, 2015), religion and spirituality received scant attention, owing to the paucity of research on the topic.

Owing to the strong presence of the Catholic Church in Central America, it is not surprising that there has been significant work in that region involving the role of religion in exiting gangs. El Salvador, in particular, has been the site of multiple examinations of the role of religion and spirituality in youth violence and gang-involved youth. Salas-Wright and colleagues (Salas-Wright, Olate, Vaughn, & Tran, 2013; Salas-Wright, Olate and Vaughn, forthcoming) have led the work in this area. In a community sample of 290 high-risk and gang-involved youth in San Salvador, they found inverse relationships between *religious coping* and *spirituality* and levels of antisocial bonds. Antisocial bonds are the indirect measure between religious coping and spirituality and the outcome measure of youth violence. Antisocial bonds are reduced by religious coping and spirituality. Given the high levels of violence, especially gang violence in El Salvador (Katz, Amaya, & Luis, 2015), this represents an important test of the role of religious coping and spirituality. A subsequent analysis (Salas-Wright, et al. forthcoming) found that the effect of spirituality was mediated by social development factors, though spirituality remained an important protective factor against delinquency involvement. In a global context, Deuchar (2018) examined the role of religion in exiting the gang in Scotland and Denmark as well as Hong Kong. His work underscored the role of masculinities in gang engagement and the reversal of such patterns through more spiritual (morality and meditation in Denmark, morality in Scotland) means. Religious conversion was an explicit pattern associated with gang leaving in Hong Kong.

In the United States, Loomis (2019) used the Pathways to Desistance data to examine the impact of religiosity and spirituality on gang membership. She found that spirituality – not religiosity – is associated with gang membership. Loomis suggests that emphasizing such things as feelings of personal support and personal closeness to a higher being may play a role in reducing ties to the gang and ultimately gang membership. Two additional American studies, each conducted with female gang members, emphasized the role of spirituality and religion in desisting from gang membership. Both of these studies were conducted with narrow populations. In the first, Marsal (2009) examined the relationship between spirituality and gang membership among a sample of female gang members. The site for the study was a minimum custody facility in North Carolina with 545 eligible females. One-hundred and eighty-five of the residents participated in the study, and just under 10 percent indicated they were a member of a street gang. For the purposes of this study, spirituality was classified as a protective factor and was operationalized as a belief in a higher power. Religious beliefs were equally strong among gang and non-gang members, and Marsal concluded that such beliefs did not function to protect individuals against gang membership. Kusha (2009) argued that Islam provides pro-

tective factors against involvement in crime owing to its strong patriarchal nature. That is, females who identify as Islamic acknowledged that their “realms of social action” were restricted and as a consequence they engaged in very low levels of crime. Kusha argues that such restrictions also function to keep young Islamic women out of gangs.

The most direct study of the role of spirituality and desistance from gangs is found in Flores’ work (2009, 2013, 2016) with gangs in Los Angeles. His work is based on a series of interviews and fieldwork in two Los Angeles neighborhoods among “recovering” gang members. He framed his work in the contexts of masculinities, immigration, religions, and marginalization. He paid particular attention to the role of two long-standing efforts to encourage re-integration of gangs in Latino neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries and Victory Outreach. Both have strong religious roots, with Homeboy Industries run by a Catholic Priest (Father Greg Boyle) and dependent on Catholic theology and Victory Outreach built on strong Pentecostal roots. As such, both have a strong redemptionist character to their approach to moving gang members away from their gangs and integrating them in less destructive (individually and socially) lifestyles. Much like Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. (2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), the disengagement processes Flores describes emphasize the *process* of leaving rather than describing gang leaving as an *event* or *decision* that occurs at a single point in time. Spirituality, rather than religious practices, plays a role in this process from Flores’ perspective, yet is not defined as the sole component of such a process.

There is also research on religion, spirituality, and gangs in prisons, which is of particular interest to this study. An important study of spirituality among gang members was conducted in Scotland and Denmark by Deuchar and colleagues (2016), who found that being in prison fostered increased spirituality and reflectiveness among inmates. Spirituality was seen as a substitute for some of the beliefs associated with masculinity that foster participation in violence and other forms of antisocial behavior. Recent work by Johnson and Densley (2018) in Brazilian prisons demonstrated that many church rituals served as a way for prison gang members to “signal” to others – gangs, prison administrators, etc. – their level of commitment to making a change and exiting the gang. It is both the internal and external manifestations that matter in this context, with the internal manifestations of religion providing support for individuals and the external manifestations providing visible and well-understood indications of a change in the individual.

11.3 The Current Study

Little is known about the role of religion and spirituality in disengagement from crime groups such as gangs. On the one hand, it could function as a *driver* of the disengagement process, leading active gang members to break away from the ties that bind the gang together. On the other hand, religion and spirituality could be a consequence of leaving a gang, something that is *used* to prevent ex-gang members

from relapsing into their old ways. The studies that examine the role of spirituality share several things in common. First, a substantial amount of such work has been done in developing countries, particularly Central America, where the Catholic Church and Catholic ministries play a large role in social life and social programming. Second, much of the work specific to gangs has failed to adequately distinguish between religion and spirituality. For the purposes of this paper, religion is identified as the formal practices and rituals of worship. This includes attendance at church, participation in choir, prayer groups, tithing, and the like. Spirituality, while a component of religious practice, is a set of beliefs that include belief in a Supreme Being, behavioral principles, and a sense of externality. Third, much of this work is based on small samples without comparison groups and often is a one-shot case study. Finally, there has been little effort to assess the extent to which disengagement from gangs was aided or not by spirituality. The current study begins to fill in these gaps in our knowledge in several ways, including a large and representative sample, a comparison group, multiple measures of religion and spirituality, and quantitative and qualitative components.

11.4 Methods

11.4.1 *Data*

Our source of data is the LoneStar Project, or the Texas Study of Trajectories, Associations, and Reentry. We briefly summarize the data here, but for a full description of the study, including research design, study protocols, descriptive statistics, human subjects review, field relations, and operational lessons, see Mitchell, McCullough, Wu, Pyrooz, and Decker (2018). Our research team interviewed a sample of inmates in Texas just prior to their release from prison in 2016, and re-interviewed them twice over the course of 12 months upon release from prison. Disproportionate stratified random sampling was used to generate a sample of 802 male respondents, derived from the population of 15,644 prisoners released during the period of data collection. The sample was stratified by gang and non-gang prison classification and selected to participate in the study using a random number generating program. Sampling fractions differed by gang classification, where inmates with non-zero levels of gang affiliation were oversampled by a factor of five. Forty-eight inmates refused to participate in the study, distributed proportionally by gang and non-gang status and prison units. The final sample consisted of 368 gang and 434 non-gang study subjects as determined by the prison system.

Interviews were conducted in two prison units that held inmates across multiple custody levels. The first unit was the release unit where our study subjects were transferred prior to leaving custody. Inmates in the general population constituted 95 percent of the sample and were interviewed at this unit. These interviews were conducted daily in an enclosed, public area of the unit known as the “bullring.”

where a concrete table-like structure separated the interviewer and the inmate. The remaining 5 percent of the sample was interviewed in the administrative segregation facility of the second unit. All of these inmates were eventually transferred to and released from the aforementioned unit. These interviews were conducted weekly in a visiting room where a glass barrier separated the interviewer and the inmate. Computer-assisted personal interviewing was used in both settings. In accordance with prison policy, study subjects were not provided incentives for initial participation in the study, although they were for the post-release interviews.

The survey instrument used in the LoneStar Project was designed primarily for quantitative purposes. An upper bound of 1190 questions were distributed across 44 sections, with gang members answering an average of 751 questions (SD [standard deviation] = 57) and non-gang members answering 631 questions ($SD = 70$). Skip patterns accounted for the number of questions answered. These sections spanned a wide range of domains, including the concepts of interest in this study: gang membership and disengagement, religion, and spirituality. Further, around two dozen of the total questions were open-ended and designed to elicit qualitative data, particularly regarding disengagement from gangs.

For this chapter, owing to our research interests, we restrict the analysis to respondents who self-reported any lifetime history of gang membership ($N = 441$). While prison classification data determined the sampling strategy for the LoneStar Project, survey data on gang membership, religion, and spirituality are the focus of this chapter. These data lend themselves quite well to address the research questions posed, as the sample is large and representative. The survey instrument contains quantitative and qualitative data tapping multiple aspects of religion and spirituality. The setting for this research also poses advantages to learn about the religion–disengagement link. With roughly 150,000 prison inmates distributed across around 110 prisons, Texas is the largest state prison system in the United States and, according to the World Prison Brief, exceeds the prison populations in European nations.

11.4.2 *Gang Measures*

Our core interest is to assess the role of religion and spirituality in the gang disengagement process. This leads us to focus on several gang-related measures. First, we relied on self-nomination to determine gang status. Respondents were asked if they had ever been a member of a gang on the street or in prison. Those who responded “yes” were asked at a later point of the survey if they had left the gang. *Former gang membership* is a dichotomous measure that captures those who had de-identified as a gang member, coded “1” ($N = 140$), and those who continue to identify as a member of a gang, coded “0” ($N = 301$). Self-nomination is an established method to measure gang membership in non-institutional settings (Curry, 2000; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001), including determining former gang membership (Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule, 2014). But interview-based surveys are rare in prison, particularly research focused on gangs, owing to concerns

about the validity of measuring gang membership. Our analysis of the LoneStar Project data (Pyrooz, Decker, & Owens, 2020) revealed that measures of gang membership satisfied the principles of validity using a multi-trait, multi-method matrix populated with survey and administrative (prison) data. Correspondence in reports of gang membership (82%) from distinct data sources were actually higher in prison than in juvenile institutions (Maxson et al., 2012) and police records (Curry, 2000). Discrepancies between survey and official data were just as likely among gang members as non-gang members (Webb, Katz, & Decker, 2006). This gives us confidence that interview-based gang research is possible in prisons and that we should have confidence in self-reports of gang membership.

The second and third gang measures focus on disengagement. As we have described, there are both motives and methods for leaving a gang. We asked former gang members to provide us with the reasons why they left their most recent gang. While we now know a fair amount about the motivations for exiting gangs on the street, we know very little about leaving gangs in prisons. It is for that reason we allowed former gang members to provide open-ended responses to this question. Themes for exiting gangs fell within the push/pull motivational framework. Pushes refer to forces or factors internal to the gang that motivate leaving, while pulls refer to forces or factors found outside of the gang. We contend that religion and spirituality constitute a “pull” that tugs members away from the gang, consistent with Deuchar (2018). Based on our consensus coding of qualitative themes, we identified the following *motivations* for leaving:

- *Religion (pull): finding God, attending religious services, reading scripture*
- *Family (pull): sense of responsibility to family, spending time with family, sadness about missing important events, and household obligations, which represent functional roles*
- *Work (pull): job responsibilities, job training, and seeking employment*
- *Positive influences (pull): pressure, monitoring, or disappointing someone, such as a romantic partner, parent, child, work colleague or role model, influences that represent affective ties*
- *Disillusionment (push): maturational reform, seeking independence from the gang lifestyle, tired of engaging in violence, shifts in gang politics, and bill of goods*
- *Triggering events (push): discontent with the gang crystallized via personal victimization, vicarious victimization, and exasperating non-violent actions*
- *Criminal justice involvement (push): leaving prison, punishment due to gang affiliation, and punishment due to gang obligations*
- *Gang structure (push): forced out by the gang, dissolution of the gang, and transitioned to another gang*

Whereas the motivations for leaving a gang address questions of “why,” the methods for leaving tackle questions of “how.” Methods can be conceived at two levels. The first concerns the break-up itself, such as getting jumped out of the gang or giving notice. The second concerns the unwinding of ties, or transitioning from Stage 2 (i.e., anticipatory socialization) to Stage 4 (i.e., post-exit validation) of the

disengagement process. We are interested in the latter and thus concentrate on *facilitators* of leaving a gang. We provided respondents with 10 possible responses, which included:

- No one or nothing
- Leaving prison
- Romantic partner
- Parent/family member
- Mentor or non-familial role model
- Education, taking classes, or getting training (e.g., vocational)
- *Church or attending religious services*
- Job or going to work
- Program or agency that helps people get out of gangs
- Moving to a different neighborhood, cell, or unit

We also included an “other” category as a catch-all, but all of the responses provided fell within the aforementioned categories, offering more precise explanations of what facilitated exit.

Our final measures examine religion and spirituality in proximity to leaving a gang. We determine if leaving a gang occurred in street (*gang exit: street*) or prison (*gang exit: prison*) settings, with the aim of assessing whether religion plays a smaller or larger role in one setting than the other. We then asked about proximity to exit. Current gang members that were asked when they intended to leave their gang provided responses that ranged from 0 (“When I get out of prison”) to 6 (“Never”). The bimodal distribution led us to generate the first two categories for *leaving proximity* (0 = intends to leave in >1 year; 1 = intends to leave gang in <1 year). Former gang members were asked the age in which they left their gang, which was subtracted from their age at the date of the interview to compute years since leaving. Based on the distribution (Mean = 7.5 years; SD = 6.8 years; Min = 0 years; Max = 28 years), we generated four additional categories that approximated quartiles, comprising the remaining four categories of the *leaving proximity* variable: 2 (“left <2 years ago” 26%); 3 (“left 2–4 years ago” 22%); 4 (“left 5–9 years ago” 21%); 5 (“left 10 or more years ago” 31%). Since our quantitative comparisons are across categories, we impose no analytic assumptions about the functional form of the relationship.

11.4.3 Religion and Spirituality Measures

Part of the aim of the LoneStar Project was to incorporate constructs and domains with relevance for criminology, which included multiple aspects of religion and spirituality. First, we included a construct of spirituality used in the longitudinal evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI: Lattimore & Visser, 2009). Our assessment of the psychometric properties of the construct uncovered two factors that we distinguish by *spirituality beliefs* and *spirituality*

practices (RMSEA = 0.082; CFI = 0.987; SRMR = 0.016). The former focuses on reports of faith, beliefs, and guidance. The latter focuses on the practices of praying and reading literature. Responses ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a four-point scale. A complete listing of the items is included in Appendix A.

Second, a construct of religious fundamentalism was included to measure the belief in, and following of, the foundational religious teachings and truths of humanity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). The revised scale consists of 12 items on a nine-point scale that ranges from “very strongly disagree” to “very strongly agree” (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Confirmatory factor analysis led us to retain only eight of the items, dropping four of the six reverse scaled items that loaded poorly, resulting in acceptable model fit (RMSEA = 0.062; CFI = 0.968; SRMR = 0.035). A complete listing of the items is included in Appendix A.

Third, we included the activism and radicalism intentions scale (ARIS) proposed by Moskalkenko, McCauley, and Rozin (2006), which requires respondents to rank the importance of salient political and social groups, such as country, racial/ethnic, religious, or some other group. *Importance of religious group* is based on a scale ranging from 1 (“not at all important”) to 7 (“extremely important”). In turn, respondents were queried about the group they felt was most important in their life, which served as the referent to answer questions about activism and radicalism intentions. For this study’s purpose, we are not interested in these intentions, but rather if respondents identify a *religious group as most important*, and if so, they were coded 1, and if a different group was identified, they were coded 0. This allows us to assess the relative importance of religious affiliations to other groups.

Fourth, as part of our broader interests in the routine activities of inmates in prison, we included a measure of time spent on religious activities. More specifically, we asked respondents to report, on a typical day, the number of hours spent “on any religious activities, such as religious services, private prayer or meditation, or Bible reading.” Respondents spent an average of 1 hour a day on religious activity (Median = 0.5 hours; SD = 1.7 hours). We capped responses at 12 hours, although 8 hours was the 99th percentile. Fifth, again drawing upon SVORI, we queried respondents about a range of service needs, or areas in their life where they needed help, including religion. Respondents were asked: “How much do you need spiritual or religious assistance?” Response categories included 0 (“Not at all”), 1 (“A little”), and 2 (“A lot”).

Our final measure pertains to religious identification. Respondents were asked: “What religion, if any, do you identify with?” For this study’s purpose, we focus only on those who identify as non-religious, as we are not concerned with whether our respondents identified with one religious denomination or another. Those who identified as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing” were coded 1, while those with any other religious affiliation were coded 0.

In summary, our approach to examining disengagement from gangs captures a wide range of religion and spirituality measures that take on qualitative and quantitative forms. This will arguably provide the most comprehensive and systematic assessment of the role of religion and spirituality in disengagement from gangs.

11.4.4 *Analytic Strategy*

Our analysis proceeds in three stages. First, we examine the motives and methods for leaving gangs. These results have been reported previously (Pyrooz & Decker, 2019), but are presented here with an emphasis on religious motives and methods. We rank-order the frequency of observations for the respective categories, which are not mutually exclusive. We contrast these observations based on gang exits on the street and in prison. We further interweave qualitative quotes that are representative of the motivations and methods in our data.

Second, we compare current and former gang members across the six types of religion and spirituality measures. The purpose of this analysis is to determine if current and former gang members differ from one another on these measures. If these groups are equal to each other, then there is reason to question the role of religion and spirituality in the disengagement process of gang members. Bivariate OLS regression models are used to determine the differences between current and former gang members. Ordered-categorical measures are standardized, while dichotomous measures are reported as proportions.

Finally, if there is merit to the argument that religion and spirituality play a role in disengagement from gangs, we would expect there to be differences based on the proximity to gang leaving. We partition our sample into two groups of active gang members and four groups of former gang members. All of the aforementioned measures of religion and spirituality are reported based on these groupings.

11.5 Results

11.5.1 *Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang*

Tables 11.1 and 11.2 report our findings on the motives and methods for leaving a gang. It is clear that religion – as evidenced by the response of finding God, attending religious services, and reading scripture – is not among the most prominent reasons for leaving a gang offered by our respondents. To be sure, push factors were identified as the primary driver in leaving gangs, while pull factors took a backseat to disillusionment with the gang. Rarely were pull factors like religion (or, for that matter, family) a standalone motivation for leaving a gang. Instead, pull factors tended to operate in tandem with push factors. Still, religion mattered. This 50-year-old former member of the Gangster Crips told us:

[I left] because I found god. I needed god in my life, so I decided to serve god.

Many saw religion as filling a void in their lives, provided something they could not find in the gang. Religion was a choice that many saw necessary as an alternative to life in the gang, as this 33-year-old former member of the Bloods stated:

I didn't want to be a part of it anymore, get deeper in religion, wanted to change mind frame.

Table 11.1 Rank-ordered motivations for gang leaving by street and prison exits

"What were the reasons why you left your gang?" (coding of open-ended responses)			
Rank-order	All gang exits <i>N</i> = 277	Gang exits: street <i>N</i> = 63	Gang exits: prison <i>N</i> = 214
1	Disillusionment (78.3%)	Disillusionment (76.2%)	Disillusionment (79.0%)
2	Family (36.1%)	Family (38.1%)	Family (35.5%)
3	Criminal justice * (22.4%)	Triggering events (27.0%)	Criminal justice (26.2%)
4	Triggering events * (15.2%)	Positive influences (12.7%)	Triggering events (11.7%)
5	Religion * (7.9%)	Criminal justice (9.5%)	Religion (9.8%)
6	Positive influences (7.2%)	Religion (1.6%)	Positive influences (5.6%)
7	Gang structure (4.0%)	Gang structure (1.6%)	Gang structure (4.7%)
8	Employment (1.1%)	Employment (1.6%)	Employment (0.9%)

Note: statistical differences were determined using bivariate tests of the equality of proportions.
 * street exits differed from prison exits, *p* < 0.05 (two-tailed)

Religion, like most pull factors, typically worked in conjunction with other factors. Here the role of family working in conjunction with religious beliefs is made clear. This 44-year-old former member of the Tangos, the largest gang in the prison system, stated:

Got closer with God and I was not in agreement with what they were doing. If I was going to be part of something, I want to help others and do good things. I also want to live for my family and shouldn't have joined the gang in the first place.

Another former Tango gang member, about age 50, combined religion as a pull factor with several push factors, telling us:

I didn't like what was going on, taking young people's lives and destroying them. Somebody got very hurt and it totally messed me up about it because he was just a child. Everyone thinks we like what we are doing but we do not. We just want or we are looking for someone who cares. There are people of course who do not want to change, but the majority do. My most important reason: found the Lord Jesus Christ.

Religion particularly mattered in prison over the street, as religion was endorsed as a motivation for leaving a gang more frequently in prison. Under 2 percent of the 63 former gang members indicated that religion played a role in their motivation to leave the gang on the street, the least endorsed category along with gang structure and employment, whereas 10 percent indicated that it played a role in prison. If religion matters, it appears as if its influence is mostly confined to institutions, a notable finding in the disengagement literature. The internal struggle between gang

Table 11.2 Rank-order facilitators of gang leaving by street and prison exits

"What helped you get out of the gang?" (fixed responses)			
Rank-order	All gang exits N = 319	Gang exits: street N = 70	Gang exits: prison N = 249
	<i>No one/nothing</i> (40.7%)	<i>No one/nothing</i> (47.1%)	<i>No one/nothing</i> (38.8%)
1	Family member (23.5%)	Family member (27.1%)	Family member (22.5%)
2	<i>Religion/church</i> * (16.6%)	Romantic partner (14.3%)	<i>Religion/church</i> (19.7%)
3	Program/agency * (13.5%)	Job (8.6%)	Program/agency (16.5%)
4	Romantic partner (10.0%)	Moving (8.6%)	Education/classes (11.6%)
5	Education/classes * (9.7%)	<i>Religion/church</i> (5.7%)	Romantic partner (8.8%)
6	Leaving prison (7.5%)	Mentor/role model (5.7%)	Leaving prison (8.4%)
7	Mentor/role model (6.9%)	Leaving prison (4.3%)	Mentor/role model (7.2%)
8	Job (6.6%)	Program/agency (2.9%)	Job (6.0%)
9	Moving (6.6%)	Education/classes (2.9%)	Moving (6.0%)

Note: statistical differences were determined using bivariate tests of the equality of proportions. *street exits differed from prison exits, $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

membership and the alternative provided by religion—again helped by family—is made clear by this 36-year-old former member of the Tangos:

Came in [to prison] with a different attitude, got a family, got kids, [you] can't worship two gods. Can't do two things. Can't do good and evil. Can't do both. Made my decision to stay away from all the negative stuff.

Whereas religion may not function as a prominent motivation for leaving a gang, it ranks as among the most prominent methods for facilitating exit from gangs. About 40 percent of the former gang members in the LoneStar Project indicated that they left their gang without any assistance. Among the remaining 60 percent, religion was the second most frequently endorsed facilitator of leaving, just behind the help provided by family. For some gang members, it was as simple as telling the gang that "he was going to be Christian," as a 46-year-old former member of the Crips did. For others, such as this 31-year-old former Blood gang member, the transition to Christianity was viewed more skeptically:

I told them I was no longer affiliated. They saw that I was serious about being a Christian and watched me. Since I was serious about being a Christian, they let me leave. If I didn't stick to my religion, there would have been consequences.

It appeared as if religion constituted a pathway for leaving that the gangs respected, not unlike what Johnson and Densley (2018) observed in Brazil. Even more telling is this response from a 62-year-old former member of the Texas Chicano Brotherhood, who stated:

I had to deal with the Gang Investigator to sign denouncement papers and stuff. I told [the gang] what I planned to do and if they had a problem with it, to take care of it. They didn't have a problem with it, but *they wanted me to make sure to tell people that I was an ex-member because of my religion. So it would put out a better worldly image.*

We italicize the religious part of the quote not because it explains how or why he left the gang, instead because it captures how leaving the gang is perceived by the larger prison population.

Every single quote about methods for leaving a gang is from individuals who left while imprisoned. Similar to motivations, the methods for leaving the gang differed by street and prison settings. On the street, only 6 percent of former gang members identified religion, taking a backseat to family members, romantic partners, employment, and moving to a new neighborhood or city; in prison, 20 percent indicated that religion helped them leave the gang, just behind family members as the primary method for leaving.

Overall, these results suggest two key findings. First, religion may function as a viable pathway out of gangs, but does not necessarily motivate one to leave on its own. Second, the influences of religion appear to be stronger – in terms of both motives and methods – inside of prisons than outside. These findings take on added importance due to the large and representative sample of current and former gang members, along with being a “deep-end” population owing to their custody status.

11.5.2 Differences in Religion and Spirituality by Current and Former Gang Membership

If religion and spirituality play a role in the process of disengagement from gangs, we would expect that current and former gang members differ from one another in their beliefs and practices. Table 11.3 displays the results comparing these groups across a range of religion and spirituality measures. In terms of significance, even a cursory glance at this table indicates across-the-board statistical differences between current and former gang members.¹

As one inmate told us, he had grown and become a different man as he got religion and moved away from his gang. The differences in this 33-year-old former

¹It should be noted that age is a possible confounder in the relationship between gang disengagement and religion/spirituality. If religion/spirituality and age are positively related that may render their relationship with disengagement spurious. That said, our findings suggest that religion/spirituality play a comparable role among younger and older gang members for most measures. The exceptions were that current gang members were as likely to report spiritual/religious reentry needs and to declare no religious affiliation as former gang members.

Table 11.3 Differences in religiosity and spirituality by current and former gang members (*N* = 441)

Measures	Current gang members (<i>N</i> = 140)		Former gang members (<i>N</i> = 301)		Stat. diff. <i>t</i> /
	Mean/%	(SD)	Mean/%	(SD)	
Spirituality: Beliefs scale ^a	-0.265	(1.190)	0.123	(0.872)	3.851*
Spirituality: Practices scale ^a	-0.297	(1.156)	0.139	(0.886)	4.340*
Religious fundamentalism scale ^a	-0.236	(1.051)	0.110	(0.958)	3.426*
ARIS: Importance of religious group ^a	-0.345	(1.161)	0.161	(0.872)	5.080*
ARIS: Religious group most important	30.0%		41.5%		2.332*
Daily hours spent on religious activities	0.698	(1.262)	1.142	(1.493)	3.045*
Spiritual/religious reentry needs ^a	-0.146	(0.961)	0.068	(1.012)	2.100*
No religious affiliation	17.9%		10.0%		2.344*

Note: statistical differences (stat. diff.) were determined using bivariate OLS regression. * *p* < 0.05
^a Standardized; (SD) = a standard deviation

Blood gang member from his time in the gang made it difficult to continue his membership.

I feel like they didn't coincide with my lifestyle, my new frame of mind. First, I became a Muslim, so that didn't coincide with gang-banging. I feel like it was childish. Because of the studies I was doing – the books I read was changing my mindset as a man – I read science of the mind and prosperity bible. I wanted to stay out of trouble. Being a part of a gang always caused violence; it was always somewhere around the corner. I thought about my family and I wanted to be a good example.

In terms of sign, the differences we observed were in the theoretically expected direction – former gang members were more religious and spiritual than current gang members. In terms of substance, the differences appear to be of consequence as well. This highlights the important role that religion plays for former gang members. Indeed, the differences we observed are not trivial in effect size. Former gang members scored 0.39 and 0.44 standard deviations higher on the respective spirituality beliefs and practices scales than current gang members. Differences in religious fundamentalism were comparable, where former gang members scored 0.35 standard deviation higher than current gang members. The largest effect size was observed in the importance assigned to religious groups in the ARIS scale – 0.51 standard deviation difference between the groups. Former gang members were 12 percentage points more likely to endorse religious groups as more important than other political or social groups (Cohen's *h* = 0.24), and eight percentage points less likely to declare having no religious affiliation (Cohen's *h* = 0.23). While in prison, the daily routines of former gang members entailed about twice as much time engrossed in religious activities than current gang members (Cohen's *d* = 0.32). Finally, despite the lower levels of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, current gang members were less likely to report spiritual and religious needs in preparation for reentry than former gang members.

These results are particularly noteworthy owing to the large and representative sample, as well as the consistency of the difference across multiple measures of

religion and spirituality. These findings provide evidence of religion and spirituality as a correlate of former gang membership. Still, it is important to recognize that disengagement is a process that unfolds over time. Religion and spirituality evolve with disengagement, leading us to a supplemental exploration that concentrates on proximity to leaving a gang.

11.5.3 Differences in Religion and Spirituality by Proximity to Gang Leaving

Our aim in the following analyses are to characterize the changes in religion and spirituality that are associated with changes in gang status. Of course, the data we analyze are cross-sectional, derived from the baseline in-prison interview with 441 inmates who had ever been in a gang in their lifetime. We partition current and former gang members into six groups based on their proximity to leave a gang. Current gang members were distinguished by their short- and long-term prospective intentions to leave; former gang members were distinguished by the years since they de-identified as a gang member.

Figures 11.1 and 11.2 demonstrate rather clearly that spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as the importance of religious groups and religious fundamentalism, increase with transitions away from a gang. It did not matter whether current gang members were a few months or a few years away from leaving; both subgroups scored lower than former gang members on all of these measures. Spirituality beliefs reflected the lagged gains we anticipated as the gang is replaced incremen-

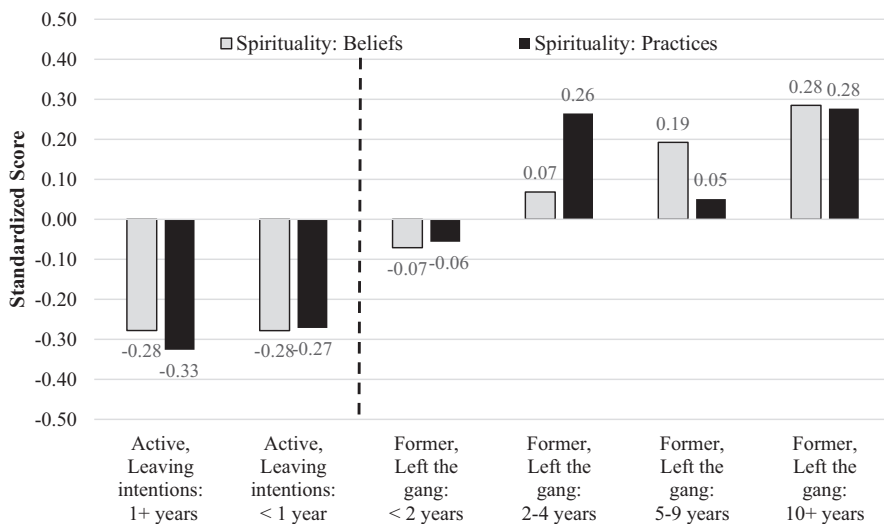


Fig. 11.1 Differences in spirituality by proximity to gang leaving (N = 441)

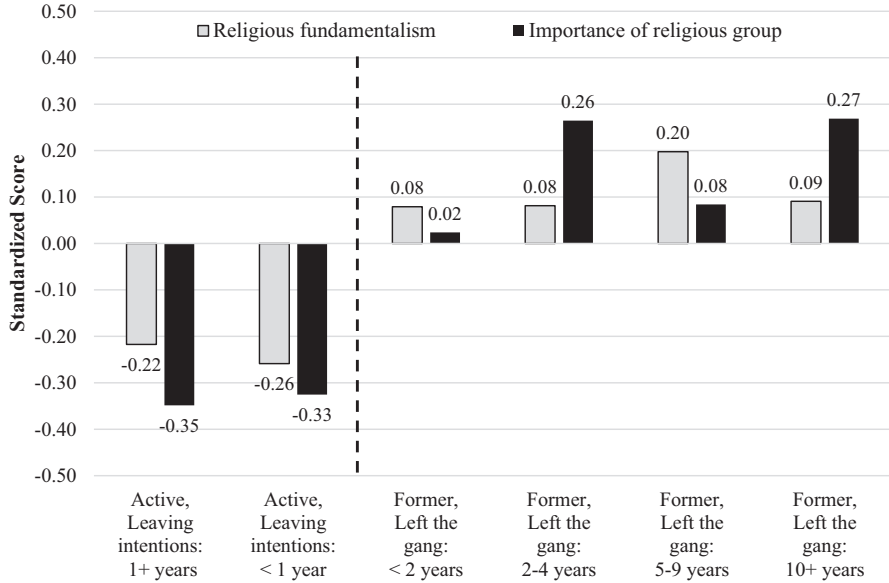


Fig. 11.2 Differences in religious fundamentalism and religious group importance by proximity to gang leaving

tally by an alternative social grouping. The patterns were less clear for spirituality practices, religious fundamentalism, and religious group importance, due mostly to the odd pattern observed among those who left the gang 5–9 years ago. Still, it is notable that those who (somewhat) recently left the gang maintained scores that were in-between current and long-time former gang members. Their transition away from the gang and toward religion and spirituality appears to be developing rather than reaching a plateau.

Figures 11.3 and 11.4 generally reveal a similar story. Religiousness is a dichotomous variable used to distinguish between individuals who identify as religious/non-religious. Non-religiousness is lower among those who have been away from the gang the longest – only 4 percent among those who exited 10 or more years ago, compared to 18 percent among those who exited in the last 2 years. This underscores the positive linear relationship between years away from the gang and religiosity. The pattern was not as clear for identifying religion as the most important political or social group in the ARIS scale, although those who have no intention of leaving the gang in the short-term scored the lowest overall. Hours spent in prison on religious activities trended upward among individuals with greater temporal distance from gangs. Whereas former gang members who recently left the gang were essentially equivalent to current gang members in their religious needs, those who had been out of the gang for longer periods indicated a greater need for religious and spiritual services in preparing for release from prison.

While these results are not definitive, they do point to the possibility of the delayed emergence of religious and spiritual differences with transitions out of

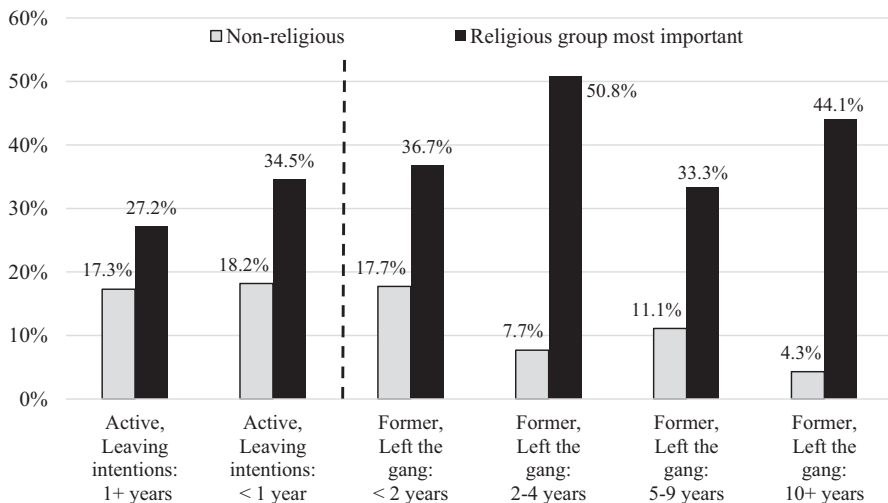


Fig. 11.3 Differences in non-religiousness and religious group importance by proximity to gang leaving

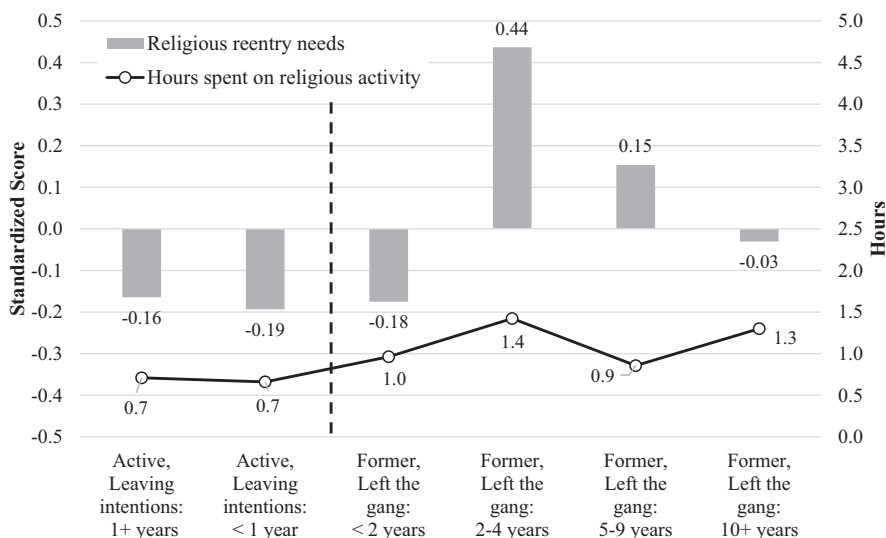


Fig. 11.4 Differences in religious needs for prisoner reentry and daily hours spent in prison on religious activity

gangs. Ideally, a panel study design that tracks people longitudinally would be better equipped to identify how gang status transitions are associated with changes in religion and spirituality. Still, these results seem to point to religion and spirituality as a consequence rather than a cause of gang disengagement. This does not preclude religion and spirituality as a method of disengagement from gangs, but it does

appear as if the beliefs and practices do not fully take hold until well after someone has left the gang. This makes religion and spirituality no less important, but it does suggest that the pathways out of gangs may be fraught with challenges and may not avail itself to all who intend to leave.

11.6 Conclusions

These findings provide support for the role of religion and spirituality in disengaging from gangs. That said, religion was rarely the single or even the primary factor involved in the motives or methods for leaving the gang. Instead, religion appears to play a supportive role in such decisions. A review of three multi-site US studies of disengaging from gangs (Roman, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2017) found that most gang exits had multiple motivations. Religion seems to be a promising “add-on” in addressing motives and methods for exiting the gang. In this sense, religion does not produce miracles in prison, but rather helps to sustain and support decisions to begin to explore alternatives to gang membership. In this context, religion plays a supportive role for primary motivations to exit the group based on family, violence, or aging out. Equally important, it is accepted by gang leadership as a valid reason – subject to verification – for exiting the gang.

It is important to note that religion played a more important role for leaving while imprisoned than on the street. This suggests that religious support such as faith communities, faith-based job training, or cognitive development may play an important role for ex-inmates but rarely functions as the sole motivation for beginning the process of cutting ties to the gang and gang members. Individuals in prison who have begun to cut ties with their gang and have added religion to their arsenal of disengagement should transition from prison to groups in the community that can support such a transition. The logic of this can be seen in the growing importance of religion to ex-gang members over time. It is important to note that leaving the gang seems to remove impediments for greater religious involvement.

Further analyses of the role of religion in the motives and methods for gang disengagement should emphasize identifying the early stages of gang disengagement and the adoption of pro-social roles as well as the cutting of ties to anti-social roles. Having supportive services and groups available when individuals have decided to cut ties to their gang or even have first doubts about continuing their affiliation is an important step in moving the disengagement process along. While we highlighted the role of “religion” in the gang disengagement process, we found little evidence that the formal trappings of religion (singing hymns, attending services, bible study) played a role in such processes. Rather, it was individual beliefs, often arrived at after enduring a personal tragedy or the growing importance of family that seemed most effective in changing individuals. One of the important findings that bears further consideration is that the role of religious motives and practices in leaving the gang appears to be respected by other gang members, and perhaps most importantly, gang leaders. Genuine demonstrations of religious belief and commitment were not met with resistance by gang leaders when individuals announced that they were

leaving the gang. This finding is consistent with qualitative work reported by Deuchar et al. (2016), Flores (2014), and Johnson and Densley (2018). While there is more work to do in this area, our results identify a promising role for religion in transitioning to a lifestyle with fewer criminogenic contacts.

Appendix A: Items comprising the spirituality and religious fundamentalism scales, partitioned by gang status ($N = 441$)

	Current gang members		Former gang members		Stat. diff.
	Mean/%	(SD)	Mean/%	(SD)	<i>t</i>
<i>Spirituality: beliefs scale</i>					
You find strength in your religion or spirituality	3.057	(1.117)	3.293	(0.881)	2.398*
You feel guided by your God in the midst of daily activities	2.764	(1.191)	3.170	(0.915)	3.921*
Your faith helps you know right from wrong	2.829	(1.181)	3.220	(0.865)	3.918*
Your spiritual beliefs help define the goals you set for yourself	2.779	(1.106)	3.093	(0.910)	3.150*
<i>Spirituality: practices scale</i>					
You pray or meditate regularly	-0.297	(1.156)	0.139	(0.886)	4.340*
You read the Bible, Koran, or other religious literature regularly	2.707	(1.300)	3.087	(0.950)	3.454*
2.257	(1.380)	2.816	(1.148)	4.449*	
<i>Religious fundamentalism scale</i>					
God has given people a perfect guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed	4.286	(1.924)	4.827	(1.674)	3.012*
The basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is always fighting against God	3.978	(2.101)	4.382	(2.108)	1.869
It is more important to be a good person than to believe in God ^a	2.229	(2.144)	1.703	(2.108)	2.421*
There are religious teachings that are so true because they are the actual message that God has given people	3.757	(2.091)	4.483	(1.720)	3.843*
There are two kinds of people: the Righteous who will be rewarded by God and the rest who will not	3.786	(2.077)	4.328	(2.007)	2.608*
To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to one, fundamentally true religion	2.629	(2.268)	3.190	(2.309)	2.389*
Satan is what people call their own bad impulses. There really is no prince of darkness who tempts us ^a	3.550	(2.219)	3.793	(2.214)	1.069
God's religion should never be tampered with, or compromised with other's beliefs	1.621	(1.801)	1.283	(1.808)	1.830

Note: statistical differences (stat. diff.) were determined using bivariate OLS regression. * $p < 0.05$

^aReverse coded in the construction of the scale

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Chapter 12

Misconduct Among Incarcerated Gang and Non-gang Youth: The Role of Structured and Unstructured Activities



Daniel Scott

12.1 Introduction

There has been a large amount of research that has analyzed the relationship between gang involvement and violence in the community. Scholarship has consistently shown that gang members are more likely to participate in delinquency and violence (Decker et al. 2013). Due to consistent findings related to gang involvement and violence, research frequently examines why this relationship exists. One prominent area of work has identified and analyzed a subculture of violence associated with gang involvement. Scholarship has frequently highlighted the existence of a gang subculture (Cohen, 1955; Lauger, 2012; Mitchell, Fahmy, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2017) and has also identified a complex relationship between gang involvement, race, and the subculture of violence (Scott, 2018; Scott, 2019). Additional research has revealed that gang-involved incarcerated offenders will engage in violence in response to an action on behalf of their gang (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007).

Only a small amount of work has been conducted specifically on gang youth in secure correctional facilities. Research has revealed that incarcerated gang members are more likely to engage in violent misconduct (DeLisi, Berg, & Hochstetler, 2004; Maxson et al., 2012; Tasca, Griffin, & Rodriguez, 2010). Research has also identified that gangs in youth correctional settings more closely resemble gangs on the street than they do adult prison gangs (Maxson, 2012; Scott & Maxson, 2016), although Pyrooz et al. (2011) argue that prison gangs are quite different than street gangs. Additional work has revealed that the less time youth have been involved in gangs the more positively they view violence (Scott, 2014). Scott (2018),

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specifically, examined violent incidents in correctional facilities motivated by gang issues and discovered that they are more likely to occur in school in correctional settings compared to violent incidents motivated by personal issues. Apart from this, the likelihood of gang violence within a youth correctional setting in relation to the activities in which the youth is participating has not been examined thoroughly.

There have been a variety of studies that have examined the relationship between unstructured/structured activities and delinquency outside correctional settings (Crawford, Novak, & Foston, 2018; Hoeben, Meldrum, & Young, 2016). Generally, this research has found that youth engaged in unstructured socializing activities are more likely to participate in delinquency, including violence (Anderson & Hughes, 2009; Hoeben & Weerman, 2014; Svensson & Oberwittler, 2010). The little research that has been conducted on structured activities and incarcerated gang youth suggests that structured activities do not reduce the incidents of violence among gang-involved incarcerated youth (Scott, 2018). But no work has directly analyzed the impact of structured activities on violent misconduct among gang-involved youth in correctional settings. An improved understanding of this relationship will provide insight into gang-specific policies and programs with the goal of decreasing the level of gang violence within incarcerated settings and therefore upon release (see Caudill, 2010; Trulson, Caudill, Haerle, & DeLisi, 2012).

Although specialized community gang programs and strategies with varying levels of effectiveness have been proposed and developed such as Civil Gang Injunctions (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013; Maxson, Hennigan, & Sloane, 2005) and the GREAT Program (Esbensen et al., 2011; Esbensen & Osgood, 1999), little work has examined the potential need for specialized strategies for addressing gang violence within youth correctional settings. The current study helps to fill this gap in the literature by analyzing the relationship between violent misconduct and structured activities such as attending school and having a job, in addition to providing time for unstructured activities among incarcerated gang youth to assess whether specialized interventions might be warranted. It is important to examine contemporary juvenile justice institutions as they provide various programs and strategies for intervention and rehabilitation for the most serious young offenders. Examining the relationship between violent misconduct, structured activities, and unstructured activities will have implications for both theory and policy on effectively addressing issues of juvenile correctional violence in the modern era.

This chapter begins with a brief literature review covering research and scholarship on correctional violence, gang involvement, the subculture of violence, and structured/unstructured activities. This will transition into quantitative analyses of both official and self-report data on incarcerated youth, followed by supplemental qualitative analyses of youth violent incident descriptions. The chapter

concludes with a discussion of both the theoretical and policy implications of this work.

12.2 Literature Review

12.2.1 *Correctional Violence*

There has been little work conducted on violent misconduct among youth incarcerated in secure correctional settings. Most of the research that has been completed tends to focus on individual youth characteristics in relation to misconduct. Incarcerated youth that are male, of a minority group, gang involved or affiliated, and have a more serious delinquent past are more likely to participate in misconduct while incarcerated (Trulson, 2007). In adult correctional settings, the younger an incarcerated offender the more likely they are to engage in violent misconduct (Kuanliang, Sorensen, & Cunningham, 2008). Scholarship has therefore revealed the importance of understanding how individual factors can positively or negatively impact violent behavior among young incarcerated offenders, and specifically the influence of gang involvement.

Some work has examined gang involvement and misconduct among prisoners. In addition to scholarship finding a significant association between gang involvement and violent misconduct (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007; Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran, & Suppa, 2002; Griffin & Hepburn, 2006; Kuanliang et al., 2008), research has revealed that core gang members are at a higher probability of participating in violence compared to peripheral members (Gaes et al., 2002) and that this significant association between gang involvement and violent misconduct was independent of other individual demographic characteristics (Griffin & Hepburn, 2006). Interestingly, research has also revealed that the longer individuals are gang involved the less likely they are to endorse violence (Scott, 2014), and thus arguably less likely engage in it. These findings suggest that in order to better understand the relationship between gang involvement and violence it is essential to take other factors into consideration.

Some work has focused on the relationship between gang involvement and peer influence among incarcerated youth. Research has revealed that incarcerated gang youth have a higher probability of participating in “group-context violence” which is frequently violence within and between gangs (Winfree et al. 1994). Additional work has revealed that a violent subculture predicts gang affiliation and activity among incarcerated youth (Zhang, Zhao, Ren, & Zhao, 2017). This is consistent with research examining friendship among incarcerated youth, finding that youth lacking close relationships with their peers were less likely to participate in institutional misbehavior compared to youth with friends (Reid, 2017). Even though some research has examined various social and situational characteristics in relation to gang involvement and correctional violence, there has been minimal work that has

analyzed factors related to how the institutional setting and/or programming impacts violent misconduct among incarcerated gang and non-gang youth.

12.2.2 Factors Influencing Gang Involvement and Violence

A variety of studies have also examined the relationship between gang membership and offending. When analyzing the literature, Pyrooz, Turanovic, Decker, and Wu (2016) found a relatively strong relationship between the two, especially when studying active gang members. Although there is some fluctuation, this finding is consistent regardless of methodological choice (e.g., official records, self-report data). This is also consistent with research that highlights the higher probability of violence involvement among gang members compared to non-gang-involved individuals in the community (see Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013 for a review), and within correctional institutions (DeLisi et al., 2004; Tasca et al., 2010). Various studies have therefore examined why gang involvement is associated with higher rates of violence. Through violence, gang members are able to accomplish goals such as building group status, or obtaining revenge (Collins, 2009). Thus, participation in violence on behalf of the gang is an avenue for gang members to portray their tough identity (Vigil 2010). Additionally, Papachristos (2009) found that violence, such as homicides, actually creates group conflict that spreads and persists as gangs engage in violence with one another and compete for dominance. Gravel, Allison, West-Fagan, McBride, and Tita (2018) also found a significant association between social distance, gang involvement, and violence. The strong relationship between gang involvement and violent behavior has spawned research that has identified a subculture of violence that exists within and between gangs and gang members.

12.2.3 Subculture of Violence and Gang Involvement

Although not directly tested in this study, it is important to discuss the prominence of the subculture of violence in correctional settings (see Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Trammell, 2012) and among gangs (Decker, Decker, & Van Winkle, 1996; Lauger, 2012; Vigil, 2002). The subculture of violence perspective argues that violent actions are utilized for status and control purposes. Violence is, therefore, impacted by the specific situational context, including the seriousness of the problem and potential harm (Baron et al. 2001). Research has also discovered that the subculture of violence is significantly related to a higher probability of general offending, not simply a preference for violence (McGloin, Schreck, Stewart, & Ousey, 2011),¹

¹ McGloin et al. (2011) argue that “the analytic and explanatory value of the subculture of violence perspective rests in the notion that violence should figure more prominently than other crimes in the overall pattern of criminal activity for people who are part of the subculture” (p. 772).

suggesting this culture has a far-reaching impact on deviant social norms more broadly.

Additional research has revealed that the street code and subculture of violence is likely to be endorsed by incarcerated youth from urban, suburban, and rural areas (Keith & Griffiths, 2014). There are allies and rivalries that exist on the street and within institutions that can be understood as a “social order” spanning multiple contexts (Lopez-Aguado, 2016). Furthermore, when violence does occur, it is not blind irrational behavior, but it is due to the actions of another, and may occur in self-defense or to defend their honor (Felson & Steadman, 1983). According to interviews with former California prisoners, there are specific rules to prison culture, which include violence being perceived as a feasible choice during select times and locations (Trammell, 2012). This was identified in earlier research as *contingent consistency* (Toch, 1986), which identifies violent responses under a variety of situational contexts and circumstances. The correctional setting forces offenders together with differing perspectives and makes them live near each other. This heightens the value of respect and the actions occurring in connection with respect (Colwell, 2007).

Gang research has frequently identified the existence of subcultural beliefs and values among gangs in the community (Cohen, 1955; Lauger, 2012; Vigil 2007; Decker et al., 1996; Mitchell et al., 2017), and within correctional facilities (Mitchell et al., 2017; Skarbek, 2014; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Vigil (2007) argues that gang members and other community members experience “multiple marginality,” which results in youth “being street socialized and learning the values and norms of the street in order to survive and maintain their lives as street people” (pg. 57). Lauger (2012) identifies that violence or the threat of violence is utilized by gang members to not only gain status, but to establish legitimacy. In this way they are attempting to establish a violent reputation beyond their own gang, which is accomplished not just through violent actions, but through talk of violence transmitted throughout the community. By accomplishing this, they are achieving acceptance in the inter-gang world. Scholarship has also found that violence occurs out of necessity (Decker et al., 1996), like when someone is disrespectful, or in self-defense. Disrespect can occur easily among gang members through the use of words and/or symbols, which necessitates a violent response for the purpose of maintaining one’s status and identity (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Finally, research conducted by Zhang et al. (2017) revealed an indirect effect of the subculture of violence on violent behavior and drug use through gang participation. This research reveals that in order to effectively understand and address gang violence it is crucial to understand how the gang subculture influences the likelihood of violent behavior among gang-involved individuals.

Scholars have examined the subculture of violence and gang involvement specifically within correctional settings. For example, Skarbek (2014) argues that prison gangs govern within correctional institutions in order to establish and maintain order. He identifies that “they have clearly defined mechanisms of information transmission and punishment that allow them to enforce rules” (pg. 87), which highlights the importance of an established subculture for both incarcerated gang and

non-gang members. Additional work has revealed a significant association between street code endorsement and violent misconduct among incarcerated gang members (Mears, Stewart, Siennick, & Simons, 2013) and has identified a distinct gang subculture that has been adapted to the institutional setting among incarcerated youth (Scott, 2019). This suggests that there is an established subculture of violence among incarcerated gang-involved youth and is arguably significantly related to their violent misconduct.

12.2.4 Structured/Unstructured Activities

A major area of research that has not been directly examined in a youth correctional setting focuses on the relationship between structured/unstructured activities of youth and the likelihood of delinquency involvement. The likelihood of offending may vary based on whether youth are participating in structured or unstructured activities. For example, youth that are engaged in unstructured socializing with peers are more likely to participate in offending behaviors (Anderson & Hughes, 2009; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Hoeben & Weerman, 2014; Hoeben & Weerman, 2016; Osgood, Wilson, O'malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996; Svensson & Oberwittler, 2010). Specifically, research has revealed a strong association between routinely engaging in unstructured activities and offending behaviors. Furthermore, involvement in unstructured activities increases the likelihood of associating with delinquent peers, which impacts the amount of delinquent opportunities youth perceive (Hoeben & Weerman, 2016). Given the significant relationship between structured/unstructured activities and offending, it is crucial to examine this relationship in correctional settings.

Work examining the situational context of delinquency has also found support for the relationship between a lack of structure and delinquent activities. Research has discovered that socializing with peers is associated with delinquency when certain situational conditions are present; this includes at least two out these three conditions: socializing, being in public, and being unsupervised (Weerman, Bernasco, Bruinsma, & Pauwels, 2015). Furthermore, a significant positive association has been found between violent delinquency specifically and unstructured socializing with peers (Maimon & Browning, 2010). But no work has directly examined the relationship between violent misconduct and structured activities among incarcerated gang and non-gang youth.

Existing literature on risk for gang involvement, gang violence, violent subcultures, and structured activities suggests the following hypotheses:

12.2.5 Hypotheses

- (a) Incarcerated gang members are more likely to participate in violent incidents than non-gang members.

- (b) Incarcerated gang members with jobs are less likely to participate in violent incidents compared to gang members without jobs.
- (c) Incarcerated gang members that attend school are less likely to participate in violent incidents compared to gang members that do not attend school.
- (d) Incarcerated gang members that spend more time participating in unstructured activities on a daily basis are more likely to participate in violent incidents.

12.3 Methods

12.3.1 *Data and Institutional Context*

Data for the current project are cross-sectional and were collected in September 2010 as part of a larger study that gathered data from multiple sources (i.e., official, youth perspectives, staff perspectives) in order to achieve a thorough understanding of the landscape of violence in the California Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). The purpose of the larger study was to look at gangs and violence in California's youth correctional facilities.

The data were taken from in-depth interviews with a stratified random sample selected from the five youth correctional facilities open at the time, which was a total of 306 interviews with male youth. The sample obtained was representative of the DJJ population with regard to age and racial demographics. Interviews were conducted privately with the youth's consent, and a representative sample of the DJJ population was obtained. The youth were informed of the purpose of the study at the beginning of each interview; they were assured that anything they said would be kept confidential, and the average length of the interviews were a little over an hour. The interview was semi-structured, consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions with a focus on select topics including feelings of safety, violence involvement, and violence avoidance. The data for this study were collected at a dynamic time in DJJ, with closings of various facilities due to a policy effort to decrease referrals, which could potentially impact facility violence. The youth placed in the remaining facilities were sentenced for increasingly more serious offenses.

12.3.2 *Analysis Plan*

For this study, quantitative methods are utilized along with supplemental qualitative analyses to aid interpretation of the results. This allows for an in-depth analysis of violent incident involvement of gang and non-gang members who are involved in two select structured activities, attending school or having a job, compared to those

youth who are not.² The statistical analyses begin with t-tests analyzing the relationship between gang membership status and involvement in select structured activities and official violent incident involvement in the last year. Due to the skew of the count dependent variable and missing data, Negative Binomial Regression models with multiple imputation are utilized for the multivariate analyses. Multivariate imputation is conducted using “mi impute” in STATA 13 software. Multiple imputation assumes the data are missing at random or that the true value of a variable is not related to the likelihood of having missing data for that variable (Rubin, 1987; Schafer, 1997). The chapter concludes with qualitative illustrations to assist in interpreting the quantitative findings.³

12.3.3 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the official total number of violent incidents participants were involved in over the year prior to the interview (mean = 2.32, Range = 0–20). This is the number of violent incidents that were seen by and recorded by correctional staff. Utilizing this variable over total violent incident involvement makes sense as this represents their most recent violent incident involvement, which is more likely to have a relationship with the structured and/or unstructured activities in which they participate.

12.3.4 Independent Variables

Independent variables are all self-report measures from interviewing the youth. The gang measure is self-report and includes youth that report currently being a member of a street gang and/or institutional gang.⁴ It is important to include both types of membership because youth report engaging in violence with rivals from the street while they are incarcerated, participating in violent behavior against rival institutional gang members, fighting due to issues internal to the gang, among other gang issues. Lastly, in order to test the proposed hypotheses, the youth self-reported number of daily unstructured hours⁵ is included, and a couple of dichotomous variables

²Choosing to utilize school and job as the structured activities was determined based on past research, and the availability of data within the selected dataset. Both school and job are structured by nature and should arguably reduce the likelihood of violent incident involvement among incarcerated youth.

³The use of personal narratives when describing violent incidents not only assist in explaining the existing subculture but abide by a specific routine that informs those involved in the general guidelines for violence participation (Lauger, 2012).

⁴One of 5 or 6 groups that are active in CA's youth correctional facilities – these are NOT “prison gangs.”

⁵Interviewers went through the youth's daily schedule with them and had the youth identify times in which they were participating in unstructured activities.

that represent whether or not the youth have a job or attend school are included in the model as independent variables.⁶

There are also multiple control variables included in the analyses. Due to the potential association between racial group identification and violence, race is included as a control. It is represented by four categories including Latino, Black, White, and Other. Latinos serve as the reference group for all multivariable analyses. Age has also been found to be related to behavioral misconduct (Gonçalves, Dirkzwager, Martins, Gonçalves, & Van der Laan, 2016), so age at interview is included in the analyses in addition to the overall number of months served in DJJ. The total number of treatment services received is also included as a control variable given the potential influence these services could have on misconduct. There is also a potential association between attitudes toward violence⁷ and correctional misconduct, so it is included as a control variable (Scott, 2014).

12.4 Results

Overall, Table 12.1 shows that the sample is primarily Latino, and most of the gang members are also Latino, followed by Black, Other, and then White. Gang members, on average, are slightly younger than non-gang members and have served less time in DJJ compared to non-gang members. On average, gang members tend to view violence more positively than non-gang members, receive slightly less

Table 12.1 Control variable descriptive statistics of gang and non-gang members ($N = 287$)

	Gang member ($n = 147$)	Non-gang member ($n = 140$)	Total
Race% ($n = 285$)			
Latino	35.8	21.7	57.5
Black	11.2	17.9	29.1
White	2.1	6.3	8.4
Other	2.5	2.5	5
Mean age in years ($n = 284$)	18.03	18.96	18.5
Mean time served in days ($n = 285$)	491.5	651.5	569
Mean violent attitude level ($n = 249$)	3.3	2.7	3
Total number of treatment services ($n = 304$)	4.7	5.1	4.9

⁶Given the missing data and the use of multiple imputation, gang membership, job status, and school attendance are not interacted with one another in these analyses due to potential bias in the results.

⁷The variable measuring attitudes toward violence was created through a list of survey items asking about youth violent attitudes and aggression that were obtained from Anderson's Code of the Streets (1999), as adapted by Stewart and Simons (2006) and from Thompson and Pleck's Masculine Role Norms Scale (1986). This was measured using a Likert scale consisting of 5-items that ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5).

treatment services, and report participating in a similar number of unstructured hours on average compared to non-gang members.

12.4.1 Quantitative Analyses

Bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to better understand the relationship between violent misconduct, gang involvement, and structured/unstructured activities in youth correctional facilities.

The ANOVA results utilizing a Bonferroni post hoc test in Table 12.2 reveal a lack of significant findings when comparing violent incident involvement in the last year for gang members with jobs. This is potentially due to the small sample size that results when comparing gang members to other gang members. Results revealed significant differences between gang members that attend school and non-gang members with a job, non-gang members that attend school, non-gang members that have a job and attend school, and non-gang members that do not have a job or attend school. Gang members that attend school but have no job were involved in a greater number of violent incidents than all of these groups, respectively.

Correlational analyses were also conducted (not shown) in order to examine the relationship between violent misconduct and hours of unstructured activities participated in daily. The results revealed no significant association for both gang members and non-gang members. Based on these findings multivariate analyses were conducted through the use of negative binomial regression and multiple imputation to account for potential sources of bias in these results. The results are displayed in Tables 12.3, 12.4, and 12.5.

Table 12.2 The impact of gang membership and structured activity on violent incident involvement in the last year

Violent incident involvement in the last year			
Gang membership and structured activity	<i>n</i>	Mean	S.D.
Gang member with a job	17	2.82	3.97
Gang member attends school ^{a, b, c, d}	95	3.66	3.57
Non-gang member with job ^a	25	1.00	1.96
Non-gang member attends school ^b	74	1.27	2.37
Gang member with a job and attends school	8	1.38	2.07
Non-gang member with a job and attends school ^c	17	0.94	2.16
Gang member with no job or school	19	2.11	1.73
Non-gang member with no job or school ^d	19	1.05	2.15

Bonferroni post hoc tests ($p < 0.05$):

^aGang member attends school vs. non gang member with job

^bGang member attends school vs. non gang member attends school

^cGang member attends school vs. non gang member with a job and attends school

^dGang member attends school vs. non gang member with no job or school

Table 12.3 Negative binomial regression analyses of violent incident involvement in the last year ($N = 304$)

	Model 1	Model 2
Independent variables	Coeff. (std. err.)	Coeff. (std. err.)
Black	-0.337 (0.182)	-0.326 (0.185)
White	-0.774* (0.331)	-0.770* (0.333)
Other	-0.945* (0.382)	-0.910* (0.386)
Age	-0.179*** (0.044)	-0.176*** (0.05)
Time served	0.0004** (0.0002)	0.0005* (0.0002)
Total number of treatment services	0.008 (0.027)	0.0101 (0.028)
Violent attitude level	0.185 (0.12)	0.188 (0.122)
Gang membership	0.807*** (0.184)	0.810*** (0.187)
Hours of unstructured time	-	0.027 (0.043)
Has a job	-	-0.168 (0.229)
Attends school	-	-0.079 (0.239)

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 12.4 Negative binomial regression analyses of violent incident involvement in the last year (gang members only, $N = 156$)

	Model 3	Model 4
Independent variables	Coeff. (std. err.)	Coeff. (std. err.)
Black	-0.504* (0.219)	-0.474* (0.217)
White	-0.516 (0.429)	-0.336 (0.433)
Other	-1.25** (0.428)	-1.19** (0.421)
Age	-0.166** (0.054)	-0.179*** (0.054)
Time served	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0003 (0.0002)
Total number of treatment services	0.051 (0.03)	0.065* (0.03)
Violent attitude level	0.061 (0.141)	0.143 (0.13)
Hours of unstructured time	-0.016 (0.062)	-
Has a job	-	-0.311 (0.234)
Attends school	-	-

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 12.5 Negative binomial regression analyses of violent incident involvement in the last year (gang members only, $n = 156$)

	Model 5	Model 6
Independent variables	Coeff. (std. err.)	Coeff. (std. err.)
Black	-0.467* (0.216)	-0.459* (0.218)
White	-0.361 (0.434)	-0.332 (0.437)
Other	-1.21** (0.421)	-1.2** (0.42)
Age	-0.169** (0.057)	-0.171** (0.057)
Time served	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0003 (0.00021)
Total number of treatment services	0.066* (0.03)	0.066* (0.031)
Violent attitude level	0.143 (0.131)	0.141 (0.134)
Hours of unstructured time	-	0.0002 (0.054)
Has a job	-	-0.241 (0.272)
Attends school	0.233 (0.213)	0.110 (0.248)

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

The results of model 1 reveal a significant and positive association between gang involvement and the number of violent respondents participated in over the last year, which confirms the first hypothesis. Some additional findings include a significant and negative association with identifying as white or an “Other” racial group compared to Latinos, and age. Lastly, there is a significant and positive association between time served and violent incident involvement in the last year.

The findings displayed in model 2 continue to show a significant and positive association between gang involvement and violence, even when including the variables representing daily hours of unstructured time, having a job, and attending school. Model 2 also reveals a lack of significance between violent incident involvement and daily hours of unstructured time, having a job, and attending school. To better understand the relationship between unstructured and structured activities with gang membership, multivariate analyses are conducted on only the gang members. The results are displayed in Tables 12.4 and 12.5.

Model 3 includes hours of unstructured time, and the results reveal a lack of significance with violent incident involvement in the last year. This does not support the second hypotheses. Additional findings include gang members that are black and from an “Other” racial groups being significantly less likely to participate in violence in the last year compared to Latino gang members. There is also a significant and negative association between age and violent incident involvement in the last year.

The findings for Model 4 include having a job and show a lack of significance with violent incident involvement in the last year. This does not support the third hypotheses. Other findings remain consistent with Model 3, with the exception of a significant and positive association between total number of treatment services received and violent incident involvement in the last year.

The findings for Model 5 include attending school, which is unrelated to violent incident involvement in the last year. This does not support the fourth hypotheses. Additional findings include gang members that are black and “Other” being significantly less likely to participate in violence in the last year compared to Latino gang members. A significant and negative association between age and violent incident involvement in the last year and a significant and positive association between total number of treatment services received and violent incident involvement in the last year.

The results for the full model are displayed in Model 6. The findings reveal a lack of significance between unstructured hours, having a job, and attending school with violent incident involvement in the last year. This does not support the second, third, or fourth hypotheses. Additional findings include gang members that are black and “Other” being significantly less likely to participate in violence in the last year compared to Latino gang members. There is a significant and negative association between age and violent incident involvement in the last year. And there is a significant and positive association between the total number of treatment services received and violent incident involvement in the last year.

Due to these unexpected findings, supplemental qualitative analyses are conducted in order to improve the comprehension of the situational dynamics of correctional violence from the incarcerated youths' perspective.

12.5 Supplemental Qualitative Analyses

The interviews provide situational illustrations for some of the findings related to school attendance and gang involvement. Specifically, they contribute to understanding why school attendance and having a job do not significantly decrease the likelihood of violent incident involvement for gang members, and why gang members who attend school and having a job might be more likely to participate in violent incidents than non-gang members.

12.5.1 *Unique Aspects of the Youth Correctional Environment*

Incarcerated youth were asked to describe violent incidents in which they participated, and select responses are provided below using pseudonyms. They provided descriptions which suggested that certain structured activities among incarcerated gang youth may not reduce the likelihood of delinquent misconduct:

Taylor: We were in school and we're enemies. We saw each other and started fighting.

This description suggests that school is a place where gang rivals or enemies will see each other, and therefore it is a place where they will engage in violence. School also appears to provide opportunities for youth to prove themselves since there are several youths gathered together in a room:

Remmy: 1-on-1; other trying to prove himself, wanted to show people he was down, other came in the classroom, said something disrespectful, I got up and started fighting.

This youth knew a rival was going to enter the classroom and planned to engage in violence with that individual once they saw them. The structure of their day and the setting were therefore capitalized on in order to address the issues of disrespect and show peers they will participate in violence.

Similarly, not only does gang violence frequently occur in school, but youth also take the opportunity to disrespect another youth and engage in violence during class:

Austin: Fight about a gang. A Southerner disrespected my gang. Fought in school with a one-on-one, just throwing blows in class.

Aside from just seeing each other, for gang rivals class seems to be a time for disrespect. Youth see enemies in school and will capitalize on this opportunity to also disrespect them even if it means fighting during school.

In addition to school there are other structured activities within youth correctional institutions that may impact the violent behavior of both gang and non-gang members. Although these descriptions are not necessarily gang specific, they do suggest that having a job may not in fact reduce the likelihood of violent misconduct for incarcerated youth. For example,

David: *The staff wanted us to pick up laundry – and we didn't want to do that. Then the 'laundry man' (another youth) got pissed off and decided to kick it off.*

Since this sample only includes serious youth offenders, this violent incident description suggests that unless all the youth are willing to cooperate, the result may in fact be violence among those parties involved. Additionally, having a job has the potential to let a rival or enemy know when and where youth are going to be for an extended period of time:

Damian: *At work, guy came in, say he wanna fight me – I was already expecting it. My ear was split, started leaking,⁸ both decided to stop fighting, "was just business."*

This allows the enemy to potentially come and start something instead of having to wait and see if they come across the youth in passing.

Additionally, capitalizing on these opportunities might occur during other structured activities.

Omar: *Playing handball with fellow southerner and a guy came over and attacked Respondent from behind and started hitting him on back of head – This guy was a fellow Southerner but an enemy on the outs.*

While playing handball during recreation time, a youth utilized this opportunity to address an internal gang issue with a Southerner that was their enemy on the street. This suggests that in addition to school are other times in which gang youth are engaged in structured activities where they will capitalize on the opportunity to engage in violence in order to address a gang-related issue.

12.5.2 Summary of Findings

In sum, gang members are significantly more likely to have participated in violent incidents in the last year compared to non-gang members even when controlling for daily unstructured hours, having a job, and attending school. There is no significant difference in violent incident involvement between gang members with and without jobs. There is also no significant association found when comparing violent incident involvement between gang members that attend school with those that do not.

⁸The term "leaking" is slang for "bleeding."

Lastly, the findings also revealed a lack of significance between the amount of daily unstructured activity hours and violent misconduct. The results overall do not support the proposed hypotheses except in the case of the first hypotheses, which proposed that gang members are more likely to participate in violent incidents than non-gang members. Based on these findings, and the supplemental qualitative analyses, the results arguably show that there is a gang effect within youth correctional settings, and not a school or structured activity effect.

Based on past research, one would assume structured activities should reduce the likelihood of violent incident involvement, but this is not necessarily the case for incarcerated gang youth. School does not have a significant influence on violent behavior, suggesting that gang members are capitalizing on opportunities for violence in school and out. The violent incident descriptions revealed that this seems to occur when gang members interact with rivals but will also occur due to internal gang issues during school and potentially other structured activities like participating in sports and other games while in the recreation area.

12.5.3 Theoretical and Policy Implications

Gang youth in correctional facilities have developed a culture of violence in which school and potentially other structured activities do not decrease the likelihood of violent incident involvement among gang members. These gang youth know they will see each other in school, at a job, or in other areas, so that is when they will disrespect one another and engage in violence with their rivals and enemies.

School and potentially other structured activities therefore offer the opportunity for rivals to interact, and for violence to occur. Based on the violent incident descriptions, it is not necessarily just school that offers these opportunities for violence, but other structured activities such as recreation time. Being actively gang involved seems to negate the potential reduction in violent incident involvement provided by structured activities. The gang rules and norms appear to take priority no matter what the youth is doing. Structure, therefore, does not appear to be protective of violence for gang members in correctional facilities.

It is also possible that since an incarcerated youth's entire day is technically structured, due to being constantly supervised and monitored, youth primarily focus on when they will interact with their rivals, regardless of the situational context. This may be because they were disrespected earlier and need to teach them a lesson, or they want to disrespect their enemy and fight a gang member to show how tough they are. Since the youth are constantly experiencing some form of structured activity, it potentially has less of an impact on their behavior than in street settings. Rather, they focus on their next opportunity to address the issues of disrespect with rival gang members or issues internal to the gang, and more highly structured settings allow them to plan such interactions.

Since the youth are living in an environment where they are under surveillance most of the time, staff need to do more than just make sure the youth have structure.

The likelihood of violence could potentially be decreased by limiting rival interaction during structured activities like school, but that is usually much easier said than done due to limited space and funding. If possible, staff may need to monitor gang membership and rivalries in order to do what they can to prevent interactions among rival gang members and therefore reduce the amount of violence between gangs. Staff may also need to take more of an active role in monitoring youth behavior when rivals interact in order to prevent gang violence before it occurs, or intervene very quickly before any serious harm is done or a riot erupts. In addition, if staff can take a more active role in understanding the culture of violence and the specific guidelines and expectations the youth abide by they could potentially reduce the amount of violence that occurs in school and other structured activities.

This obviously does not solve the problem of gang violence, but it may reduce gang violence among incarcerated youth by limiting their interaction. To hopefully help address the issue of gang violence, developing a conflict resolution program specializing in gang involved youth would potentially be beneficial. This would be a program where rival gang youth meet one on one with a staff mediator present where the youth could discuss their issues without resorting to violence. Limiting the presence of other gang peers is crucial to the success of this type of program given their potential negative influence on one another (Carson, Wiley, & Esbensen, 2017; Reid, 2017).

12.5.4 Conclusion

Overall, going to school and having a job while incarcerated does not significantly reduce the likelihood of violent incident involvement for gang and non-gang members. Structured activities such as school actually provide opportunities for violence among incarcerated gang youth; violence motivated by gang issues may be potentially more likely to occur in school, at a job, or in another type of structured activity (also see Scott, 2018).

There are various limitations of this study that need to be addressed. The data are cross-sectional, so causation cannot be determined. The sample includes only serious young offenders incarcerated in one state, so the generalizability of the findings is limited. Lastly, the sample size is small. Future studies need to be conducted among various incarcerated young offenders across multiple states and abroad to better comprehend the relationship between unstructured activities, structured activities, gang involvement, and violence among incarcerated youth. This would also help to support the generalizability of these findings.

More research needs to be conducted on youth in correctional settings to determine during what other structured activities youth will capitalize on opportunities to engage in violence with rivals and when they will not. It may be that staff need to play a more proactive role in familiarizing themselves with gang culture so that they will be better equipped to either prevent gang violence from occurring while in school or be able to intervene as soon as possible.

In addition to having a job, and/or attending school, an incarcerated youth's day is regimented, and arguably structured constantly throughout the day. Even when youth report participating in unstructured time, they are still constantly monitored and do not get to choose when or where that unstructured time occurs. Within youth correctional settings, it is possible that youth might be receiving too much structure or, given the subculture of violence the youth have established, they may not be receiving the right kind of structure. Funding This study was conducted with the support of funding from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Agreement #5600001351. The opinions expressed herein represent those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the CDCR.

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Chapter 13

Understanding Adverse Effects in Gang-Focused Interventions: A Critical Review



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Programs that aim to reduce gang involvement and violence can sometimes unintentionally make problems worse. Developers such as police, psychologists, and criminologists design interventions that try to steer youth away from gangs or reduce recidivism in adult gang offenders. The interventions may make intuitive sense, but when rigorously tested, sometimes people who received the interventions fare worse—with more arrests, say—than those in untreated control groups. Determining what caused adverse effects, or effects that favor control groups, requires careful investigation.

In recent years, scholars have argued for the importance of examining harmful effects in crime-prevention programs (Barnett & Howard, 2018; McCord, 2003; Welsh & Rocque, 2014). Several strategies for gang and non-gang offenders, including boot camps (Wilson, Mackenzie, & Mitchell, 2008) and direct street outreach to gangs (Braga, 2016; Wilson & Chermak, 2011), are associated with unintended increases in recidivism, shootings, and other negative outcomes. However, scholars have noted that not all adverse effects indicate that programs are harmful, since effects favoring control groups can emerge for complex reasons (Ekblom & Pease, 1995; Welsh & Rocque, 2014).

In this chapter, we present a review of controlled trials of gang-focused interventions that led to statistically significant adverse effects for individuals. We aim to explore what caused adverse effects in these studies, and whether they indicate that the programs were actually harmful. While Braga (2016) reviewed one type of gang-focused intervention (so-called “streetworker” programs), there have been no published reviews of the broader range of gang programs that produced adverse effects for individuals. This chapter fills a gap in the literature by exploring what caused adverse effects across a diverse array of gang-focused interventions.

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13.1 What Causes Adverse Effects?

There are several ways interventions for people involved in crimes can go awry. Some programs are based on a flawed theory of behavior change, such that activities that program developers expect will be helpful to participants are actually harmful. This is sometimes called *theory failure* (Eckblom & Pease, 1995), and the well-known program Scared Straight is a good example (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000). Scared Straight is based on the theory that at-risk kids can be deterred from delinquency by visiting a prison to see what life behind bars with hardcore criminals is like. Unfortunately, youth in Scared Straight were more delinquent than controls at outcome, possibly because the experience encouraged them to commit more delinquent acts to show they were, ironically, not scared (Finckenauer, 1982). Thus, the theory that visiting prison would deter future crimes failed.

Theory failure can also occur when the target population for a program is inappropriate. For example, a residential group-based intervention may be effective for offenders who have a high risk of recidivating, but could actually be harmful for those at lower risk. For lower risk offenders, such a program might disrupt existing support networks that actually reduce their risk of reoffending (e.g., connections with prosocial friends, family, etc.), or expose them to new antisocial behaviors in an environment where peers are likely to reinforce them (Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Holsinger, 2006). This mismatch between offender needs and intervention type and intensity violates the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, a well-supported set of principles for effective assessment and intervention in criminal justice populations (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990). The RNR model posits that effective interventions should (1) match participants' risk of offending (with higher risk participants receiving more intensive services); (2) target criminogenic needs, or factors likely to cause criminal behavior, such as pro-criminal attitudes or substance abuse; and (3) respond to offenders' strengths and skill deficits by using cognitive-behavioral principles (Public Safety Canada, 2007). In their review of ineffective interventions for adult offenders, Barnett and Howard (2018) argued that programs that failed to adhere to RNR principles were associated with increases in recidivism. Meta-analyses of crime-prevention programs also find those that do not adhere to RNR principles are often ineffective or harmful (Andrews et al., 1990; Andrews & Bonta, 2010a, 2010b).

Interventions can also fail if they are poorly implemented, even if they are grounded in good theory and RNR principles (Barnett & Howard, 2018; Welsh & Rocque, 2014). If a program's active ingredients are provided weakly or not at all, *implementation failure* may produce inconclusive or adverse effects (Eckblom & Pease, 1995). Poor monitoring and supervision of staff, high turnover, organizational mismanagement, and inconsistent collaboration with community partners may result in failures to implement particularly helpful intervention strategies, possibly leaving interventions to rely on less helpful elements. For example, a program that includes early release from incarceration and job placement could be harmful if

participants are released but not successfully placed in jobs. Likewise, programs without an involved researcher, written program manuals, and regular clinical supervision of providers tend to be less effective than those with such characteristics (Andrews & Dowden, 2005). When a program produces an adverse effect, in the absence of clear theory failure or another plausible alternative explanation, and especially when other trials of the same intervention have been successful, implementation failure is a distinct possibility (Welsh & Rocque, 2014).

Theory and implementation failure may result in harmful effects, but other problems with research design and measurement validity can produce adverse effects that are less easily interpreted. *Measurement failure* occurs when evaluation methods do not adequately detect an intervention's true effects (Ekblom & Pease, 1995). The likelihood of measurement failure increases if research methods change the way outcomes are detected across treatment and control groups. For example, if treated participants have more opportunity to offend than controls because they are incarcerated for less time, higher rates of offending in one group may reflect that time difference, confounding intervention effects. Likewise, if interview questions are asked differently for each group (e.g., Williams, Cohen, & Curry, 1999), or if differences between treatment and control groups at baseline create significant confounds (e.g., Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005b), outcome differences between groups may be due to measurement failure, rather than the intervention.

One example of possible measurement failure involves using the average number of participant arrests as an outcome – a common index of recidivism in gang and crime prevention programs (e.g., Braga, Piehl, & Hureau, 2009; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2006). Arrests for a given individual may not be independent events, since an arrest can result in incarceration, incapacitating the individual for significant portions of a study follow-up period (Bhati & Piquero, 2007). Criminally active probationers are often reincarcerated (Petersilia, 1990), so if the number of arrests is used to measure program effects on recidivism, evaluators should account for the individual's time in the community (Petersilia & Turner, 1993), but often do not. Incarceration may be less likely following minor offenses than severe offenses, such that numbers of arrests could paradoxically increase for offenders who commit less severe crimes. In sum, the number of arrests can be challenging to interpret as an indicator of program effectiveness or harm. In contrast, measures such as the proportion of study participants rearrested, self-reported offenses, or time to first rearrest do not suffer the same validity problems.

Clearly, adverse effects can emerge for several reasons, but determining what caused an effect in any given study can be challenging. Our recent systematic review found that the presence of law enforcement officers as gang intervention providers increased the risk of adverse effects, possibly because police and probation officers *detect* more offending among intervention participants than untreated controls (Rubenson, Galbraith, Shin, Beam, & Huey, 2020). Thus, higher crime detection may lead to adverse effects in a program evaluation, even if an intervention is neutral or beneficial (Hyatt & Barnes, 2017; Petersilia & Turner, 1993).

13.2 The Present Study

This chapter complements the findings in Rubenson et al. (2020) by critically reviewing four representative gang interventions with theoretical, methodological, and implementation failures that may have contributed to adverse effects. The studies are diverse in theoretical orientation, target population, and research design. Below we review their core theories, intervention implementation, and research methods, then hypothesize about what caused adverse effects and whether the interventions were harmful. We conclude with recommendations for increasing confidence that detected effects are real and discuss how new technologies and social media affect data collection for intervention studies, with potential benefits and challenges for interpreting program effects.

13.3 Method

The present study grew out of a review and meta-analysis of controlled evaluations of gang-focused interventions (Huey, Lewine, & Rubenson, 2016; Rubenson et al., 2020). We conducted a literature search as described in Huey et al. (2016) using online databases and references listed in gang-focused meta-analyses and reviews (e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000; Wong, Gravel, Bouchard, Morselli, & Descormiers, 2012). Eligible studies included (1) predominantly gang-involved participants, or separate outcome data for gang-involved participants; (2) a control or comparison group; (3) assessment of gang involvement or antisocial behavior as intervention outcomes; and (4) posttreatment or follow-up outcomes for individual participants. We reviewed these for studies that reported at least one statistically significant effect favoring individuals in the control group for antisocial behavior or gang involvement (i.e., an adverse effect). We excluded studies that only reported outcomes at the neighborhood or community level, rather than for individuals, or if they were not written in English. Although some programs measured secondary treatment targets, such as changes in educational attainment or prosocial skills, we limit our discussion to outcomes related to antisocial behavior and gang involvement.

13.4 Results

The literature search yielded 41 studies, eight of which produced one or more adverse effects (Agopian, 1990; Peters et al., 1996; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2002; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005c, 2005d; Wiebush, Wagner, McNulty, Wang, & Le, 2005; Willman & Snortum, 1982; Wodarski, Filipczak, McCombs, Koustenis, & Rusilko, 1979). We review four studies that exemplify a range of intervention

strategies, research methods, and theories that may have contributed to adverse outcomes.¹ Table 13.1 provides brief descriptions of the four evaluations reviewed, including sample, content, and primary outcomes.

Table 13.1 Gang-focused intervention evaluations with adverse effects

Authors, year, program name, & setting	Sample	Design and intervention	Significant effects
Agopian (1990) Intensive Supervision Probation (ISP), Los Angeles, CA	158 adult gang offenders with histories of drug use or sales	Retrospective quasi-experimental. Received intensive supervision or regular probation. Groups matched by gender, education, marital status, and drug offenses	At 6-month and 1-year follow-up, more ISP participants were serving time in jail or prison than controls
Wiebush et al. (2005) Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP), Las Vegas, NV	247 incarcerated juvenile offenders rated “extremely high risk” for recidivism, 55% gang members	Randomly assigned to IAP or traditional juvenile services. IAP included case management, intensive supervision with community-based services, and graduated rewards and sanctions	A greater proportion of IAP youth had major institutional misconduct and technical violations of parole than controls
Spergel et al. (2005d) Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression, Riverside, CA	369 youth gang members (48%), associate gang members (11%) or at high risk of gang involvement (14%). 60% offenders	Prospective quasi-experimental. Treatment group received (from most to least used) individual counseling, suppression, group services, job services, case planning, family counseling, material support, and school services. Demographically matched controls received no treatment	Treated youth increased drug arrests, but decreased arrests for serious violence in post-program period relative to controls
Peters et al. (1996) Environmental Youth Corps (EYC), Mobile, AL	374 non-violent adjudicated youth, categorized as “high risk” of continuing delinquency. 44% gang-involved	Randomly assigned to EYC, a 90-day military-style boot camp focused on discipline, educational remediation, community service, and 6–9 month reduced supervision aftercare, or controls. Controls received usual probation or residential services, plus one or more services for substance abuse, education, anger management, or mental health	EYC youth were faster to recidivate than controls

¹We chose not to review one study where adverse effects were likely due to a statistical error (Wodarski et al., 1979), one that provided no details about program implementation (Willman & Snortum, 1982), and we review only one of three trials of the same Spergel model program (Spergel et al., 2006) with adverse effects.

13.4.1 *Intensive Supervision Probation: Los Angeles, CA (1988–1989)*

Agopian (1990) evaluated the Los Angeles intensive supervision probation (ISP) program compared to regular probation in a retrospective quasi-experiment using matched controls. ISP is a community-based alternative to incarceration or regular probation designed to be “restrictive” and “invasive” (Hyatt & Barnes, 2017; Petersilia, 1990), which is still used throughout the United States (e.g., County of San Mateo Probation, 2019; Nevada Department of Public Safety, 2019; San Diego County, 2019). Probationers on ISP are supposed to have more frequent contacts with probation officers, drug testing, and home visits compared to standard probation (Hyatt & Barnes, 2017). The goals of the Los Angeles ISP were to “control high-risk offenders, reduce recidivism, and quickly return program violators to court” (p. 215). One hundred fifty-eight mostly male, repeat offenders were selected from the South-Central Gang Unit to participate in the study. Overall, there were no beneficial effects on recidivism, and at 6-month follow-up, significantly more ISP participants were sentenced to prison than controls (24% compared to 4%, respectively).

Was There Theory Failure? Yes. ISP is based on deterrence theory, in the sense that “increased surveillance will act as a constraint on the probationer and the likelihood of detection will act as a deterrent to crime” (Petersilia & Turner, 1991; p. 651). Intensively supervising clients clearly succeeded in returning violators to court, since more ISP clients in Agopian’s (1990) evaluation were sent to prison. However, intensive supervision does not appear to deter new crimes; rather, it may simply increase the likelihood that law enforcement will detect violations and new crimes (Hyatt & Barnes, 2017; Mackenzie & De Li, 2002; Turner & Petersilia, 1992). Other ISP evaluations also detect a high rate of probation violations and find that the program increases recidivism, costs more, and is extremely aversive to probationers (e.g., Hyatt & Barnes, 2017; Petersilia, 1990). Likewise, systematic reviews of crime prevention programs find that deterrence-based programs that rely on surveillance without rehabilitative support can increase recidivism (Barnett & Howard, 2018; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2007).

Additionally, the Los Angeles ISP did not appear to adhere to the RNR model. While it targeted high-risk offenders with multiple priors, it was not clearly responsive to criminogenic needs. Most ISP clients (>90%) were ordered to refrain from contact with specified persons; observe a curfew; and submit to drug testing, electronic surveillance, and random searches. Far fewer, however, were ordered to drug treatment (38%), alcohol treatment (3%), educational programs (9%), psychological counseling (4%), or “antibuse” (sic) programs (1%). Some clients were also ordered to other potentially needs-responsive activities (i.e., to maintain or seek employment, perform community service, or abstain from alcohol). However, based on Agopian’s (1990) description, it is unclear whether or not these services were

high quality, nor whether ISP clients actually needed or received the described services.

Was there implementation failure? Yes. Although more ISP clients than controls were *ordered* to restrictions and intensive supervision, only drug testing was more intensive for ISP clients. Otherwise, the control group actually received slightly more contacts with probation officers than did ISP clients during the last 6 months of supervision, though it is unclear whether this difference was significant. Although ISP clients were supposed to receive more frequent electronic monitoring, home searches, and curfews, rates were similar for control clients. Implementation failure essentially made ISP similar to standard probation.

Was There Measurement Failure? Possibly. Two problems with study design and measurement may have contributed to adverse effects. First, although the study was designed with a retrospectively matched comparison group, significant differences between the groups may have skewed recidivism results to favor controls. In general, the ISP group had more extensive criminal histories at baseline; a greater proportion had prior arrest histories, felony convictions, and misdemeanor convictions, all of which can predict subsequent arrests during program evaluations (e.g., Spergel et al., 2006).

Second, increased drug testing may have made detecting probation violations more likely for ISP clients than for controls, regardless of rates of actual drug offenses. ISP clients were essentially monitored more frequently, increasing their chances of being caught violating probation terms, so it is not surprising that more of them were sentenced to prison at follow-up. It is unknown whether the adverse effect in Agopian (1990) reflects an increase in offending or simply increased monitoring of one group.

Conclusions Theory failure may have caused the adverse effect in Agopian's (1990) evaluation of ISP, although measurement failure may have contributed as well. Implementation failure seems unlikely to have caused the adverse effects, since it made ISP more similar to standard probation. Surveillance and supervision programs without real commitments to rehabilitative services tend to increase or fail to reduce recidivism in the broader crime prevention literature (Barnett & Howard, 2018), and this program for gang members found similar results. Although supervision in this evaluation was less intense than intended, ISP participants still received more drug testing than controls, giving law enforcement more opportunities to detect violations among ISP participants, which may have contributed to the adverse effect (Agopian, 1990). Baseline differences favoring controls may also have contributed.

It is unclear whether ISP made participants more likely to reoffend than control participants, and other ISP studies suggest the model is at least unhelpful, if not harmful. However, the result of spending more time in prison arguably was harmful in the long term, since incarceration removes participants from families, employment opportunities, and prosocial bonds (Golembeski & Fullilove, 2008).

13.4.2 *Intensive Aftercare Program: Las Vegas, NV (1995–2000)*

The Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP; Wiebush et al., 2005) served incarcerated juveniles in a special custodial unit, where they provided life skills instruction, case management, graduated rewards and sanctions, and then intensive supervision and community-based services following release. Wiebush et al. (2005) conducted three controlled evaluations of IAP in different cities; we focus our review on the Las Vegas site because it served predominantly gang members.² Two hundred forty-seven ethnically diverse male juvenile offenders at high-risk for reoffending were randomly assigned to Las Vegas IAP or traditional services. At the 12-month follow-up, there were no significant beneficial effects of IAP. However, IAP youth had significantly more technical violations of parole than controls, and a greater proportion of IAP youth showed major institutional misconduct.

Was There Theory Failure? Possibly. IAP is based on strain, social learning, and social control theories.³ Together, these suggest that delinquency arises out of weak social controls, inadequate social opportunities and resources, and negative peer influences (Agnew, 1992; Akers & Jennings, 2016; Hirschi, 2017). Based on these theories, Wiebush et al. (2005) suggest that effective intervention requires several strategies: intensive supervision, social services, and a structured and gradual transition back into the community (Wiebush et al., 2005). Intensive supervision may be an attempt to respond to weak social controls and negative peer influences, while life skills and community-based services may be responses to inadequate social opportunities and resources, although it is unclear whether these are effective responses.

It appears the IAP model adhered to RNR principles. For example, a key tenet of IAP was “careful assessment of youth needs and an appropriate matching of needs with services based on the assessment results” (pp. 70–71). IAP in Las Vegas targeted high-risk youth, used an empirically based risk assessment tool, and attempted to match services to level of risk. Furthermore, IAP services addressed both criminogenic needs (e.g., substance use) and were tailored to respond to youth’s specific skills and deficits, for example, offering family counseling to youth who had difficulties managing family relationships.

IAP seemed to combine intensive supervision with treatment services that targeted offenders’ skill deficits. Is this an effective model for reducing recidivism?

²Less than half the youth at the other two sites were identified as gang members.

³Strain theory posits that society pressures individuals to achieve socially accepted goals (e.g. buying a home). Individuals who lack means to achieve such goals experience strain and commit crimes to gain financial security so they can achieve these goals (Agnew, 1992). Social learning theory posits that people learn pro-criminal attitudes and behaviors from deviant peers (Akers & Jennings, 2016). Social control theory asserts that people who feel they have a stake in legitimate society are more likely to obey the law, while those who engage in criminal behavior feel they do not have a stake in society (Hirschi, 2017).

For adults, treatment-oriented intensive supervision may be beneficial (Petersilia & Turner, 1993; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2007). For juveniles, evidence is mixed. One systematic review of 18 evaluations of juvenile intensive probation supervision programs found no benefits overall in crime outcomes (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2007). A meta-analysis of juvenile intensive probation supervision and reentry/aftercare programs found contradictory results; such programs reduced *alleged* offenses (e.g., arrests, charges, police contacts, etc.) but increased *convicted* offenses (e.g., convictions, adjudications, incarcerations; Bouchard & Wong, 2018). On the other hand, one study of a more recent ISP program for juvenile gang offenders in Manitoba, Canada that included a mentorship component (not included in the aforementioned reviews) successfully reduced recidivism compared to usual probation services (Weinrath, Donatelli, & Murchison, 2016). The mixed evidence suggests it is not clear whether combining treatment services with intensive supervision for juveniles is an effective model. IAP was also unsuccessful at the two sites with mainly non-gang offenders, producing significant adverse effects and no beneficial effects, suggesting the model may be flawed. Strain, social control, and social learning theories may be reasonable bases for intervention, but mixed outcomes from the juvenile literature and the failure of the other two IAP evaluations by Wiebush et al. (2005) suggest that intensive supervision plus rehabilitative services does not consistently reduce recidivism.

Was There Implementation Failure? Possibly. Wiebush et al. (2005) gave the Las Vegas IAP an overall rating of “moderate implementation” (p. 47). IAP successfully provided high-intensity community supervision and treatment services, especially compared to controls. All elements of community supervision and surveillance were strongly implemented; for example, parole officers had exclusively IAP case-loads of fewer than 15, contacts with parolees were frequent, and field agents conducted weekend supervision as planned. The structured transition back into the community also adhered to plan, with formal step-downs in parole contact frequency.

However, several rehabilitative and administrative elements of the model were only moderately or weakly implemented, according to the researchers. A key element of the model involved creating “linkages with community resources and social networks,” which suffered from several barriers. For example, pre-release planning was hampered by poor family involvement and staffing vacancies, and the life skills curriculum was delivered only sporadically while youth were institutionalized. Staff turnover was “extensive,” positions responsible for coordinating community rehabilitative services were vacant, and planned pre-release trips into the community never happened. There was also “mixed support by a series of institutional administrators,” one particularly ineffective administrator “hurt the project,” and a management team was never formed (p. 49). While supervision was reportedly intensive, treatment services seem to have been less well implemented. Since intensive supervision on its own is generally ineffective, the weak to moderate implementation of rehabilitative services may have been particularly damaging to the IAP model.

Was There Measurement Failure? Possibly. Intensive supervision itself may have increased detection of new offenses and violations in the treatment group. Parole officers in Nevada have the power to arrest and charge youth with offenses, and the authors suggest this could have contributed to the adverse effect for technical violations (Wiebush et al., 2005, p. 85). For example, parole officers can make drug and weapons charges if they see those items during a home visit. In sum, IAP participants may have been more likely to be caught offending because they were intensively supervised, compared to controls, and the intensive supervision was reportedly well implemented.

Conclusions Adverse effects in Wiebush et al.'s (2005) Las Vegas IAP trial may have been caused by a combination of theory, measurement, and implementation failure. While IAP's intensive supervision appears to have been implemented as intended, treatment and community reentry services were less so. Wiebush et al. (2005) note there were difficulties effectively engaging peer and family networks in care, which may have undermined positive changes (p. 85). They speculate that community-based resources like drug treatment were not always high quality. These implementation weaknesses may have left the intervention relying primarily on supervision over rehabilitative services. Given the issues with measurement, it is not clear whether IAP increased reoffending among treated participants, or simply the rate of detecting offenses.

13.4.3 Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression: Riverside, CA (1997–2000)

The Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression, known as the Spergel model, was implemented at six sites with heavy gang involvement in the United States (Spergel et al., 2006). The project targeted gang-involved youth offenders from high-crime neighborhoods and provided individual counseling, suppression, group services, job services, school services, case planning, family counseling, and material support (Spergel et al., 2005d). "Youth outreach workers," mainly former gang members, were the primary providers along with a mixed team that included probation and police. The project also required community grass-roots organization, with the goal of changing problematic social and economic factors that contributed to the gang problem in the communities.

Spergel et al. (2006) considered the trial in Riverside, CA, to be one of the three "successful" implementations of the model (along with Chicago, IL, and Mesa, AZ; Spergel et al., 2003, 2002), since gang violence declined in the treatment area, relative to the comparison area, while the three other sites produced mainly null and a few adverse results (Bloomington-Normal, IL, Tucson, AZ, and San Antonio, TX;

Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). However, the Riverside trial actually produced significant beneficial *and* adverse effects for individuals; arrests for serious violence dropped for intervention youths while they increased for comparisons, but intervention youth were also arrested more often for drug charges in the post-program period than control youth. We discuss the Riverside trial here because its mixed outcomes exemplify the Spergel model's successes and failures.

Was There Theory Failure? Possibly. The Spergel model is based on multiple social, criminological, and psychological theories and uses several intervention strategies. The model incorporates elements of ecological, social disorganization, anomie, opportunity, socialization, and maturational theories, since "no one theory sufficiently accounts for, nor can predict, the behavior of gang youth or provide adequate direction for policy or program development" (Spergel et al., 2003; p. 8.4). Together, these theories suggest that effective intervention requires changes to the economy, neighborhood, police, peer network, and the individual. The Spergel model sought to change problematic social and economic forces contributing to the gang problem by mobilizing law enforcement, local agencies, and citizens, and enhancing social, recreational, and occupational opportunities and treatment services for youth. The primary youth-facing strategy was direct street outreach by workers who were usually former gang members. With so many theories and intervention strategies, it is hard to tell whether there was theory failure, or to what extent the program's strategies reasonably reflected the underpinning theories of crime prevention.

The Riverside program appeared to adhere to risk and need principles of the RNR model, but perhaps not to responsivity. An assessment team identified and planned services that targeted youth's specific needs, and matched services to risk level, so that younger gang members and those with more serious arrest histories were provided with more services. Individual counseling was the most frequently used intervention strategy and was provided by youth outreach workers and occasionally probation officers. It is not clear what counseling entailed, but providers were probably not trained in cognitive behavioral principles in this 1990s intervention.

Klein (2011) notes that disaggregating the effects of the multiple strategies, settings, client types, and combinations thereof in comprehensive programs is challenging, although the Spergel model programs attempt to do so. Spergel et al. (2006) identified eight strategies as most important for success (city/county leadership, interagency street team coordination, criminal justice participation, lead agency management/commitment, suppression, organizational change and development, balance of service, and targeting of appropriate youth), and three others as moderately important (community mobilization, crisis intervention/outreach, and social opportunities provision). The finding suggests that nearly everything is important, which may be true, and not very informative.

However, Braga (2016) argued that programs that rely on street outreach to gang youth as a primary intervention strategy may represent theory failure. Several so-called streetworker programs from the 2000s seemed to increase rates of shootings,

homicides, and assaults (Fox, Katz, Choate, & Hedberg, 2015; Wilson & Chermak, 2011), although most evaluations only measured outcomes for communities, not for individual participants. Streetworker programs like the Spergel model may inadvertently increase gang cohesion. Streetworkers are often former gang members hired for their “street cred,” familiarity with gang life, and ability to connect well with current gang members. Yet Klein (2011) and Braga (2016) describe how former gang members are often reluctant to share information with collaborating law enforcement, are sometimes arrested for committing crimes during interventions, and can share stories with youth that inadvertently glorify gang life and increase youths’ identification as gang members.

Braga (2016) notes that many streetworker programs from the 2000s were proclaimed “successes” even though they produced mixed effects. This seems to be the case with the Spergel model programs as well. Two other trials of the Spergel model produced mixed outcomes as well, reporting both significant beneficial and adverse effects (Spergel et al., 2002, 2005c), which could be evidence of theory failure.

Was There Implementation Failure? Yes. Klein and Maxson (2006) suggest that the Spergel programs were so complex that every element provided another opportunity for implementation failure. Indeed, implementation strength at Riverside varied depending on the intervention strategy, with some significant weaknesses. Spergel and colleagues (2005d) used progress reports, funding applications, and site visits to track service use and treatment fidelity throughout the intervention. They found that the Riverside project “did not begin to substantially meet the requirements” of the model in terms of community mobilization and organization until leadership changed in the latter half of the project (Spergel et al., 2005d, p. 6.1).

Problems with the youth outreach workers’ performance were also apparent throughout the project. In addition to high turnover, outreach workers appeared to focus on less-delinquent youth who were more receptive to their services, rather than on the hardcore delinquent youth they were meant to target. Some avoided working at nights and in higher-risk areas, the very times and places they were needed most. Similar to other streetworker programs, outreach workers were also reluctant to share information about gangs with collaborating law enforcement.

However, other aspects of the Spergel model were reportedly well implemented, like employment training and suppression. Youth were placed in jobs and were given training by the City of Riverside, and the police ultimately collaborated with other agencies and helped mediate gang conflict situations.

Was There Measurement Failure? Yes. Measurement failure may have occurred in two ways: baseline differences between treatment and comparison areas and using the number of arrests as an outcome measure may have skewed results. First, comparison youth for the Riverside evaluation were less delinquent and had a greater proportion of females than treatment youth at baseline, differences which may have skewed outcomes to favor controls at post-treatment and follow-up. There were also different police arrest practices in the two communities, which may have affected the rates of detecting crimes across the two areas.

Second, a primary outcome was change over time across groups for the number of arrests. Although Spergel and colleagues (2005d) intended to measure self-reported delinquency, they were unable to obtain that data for many participants at follow-up, so they had to rely on official arrest data. It is possible that the adverse effect for drug arrests emerged in part due to issues described previously with measuring arrest frequency within a study period.

Conclusions A combination of measurement, implementation, and theory failure may have contributed to the adverse effect seen in the Riverside Spergel program. Measurement validity may have suffered from significant differences between treatment and comparison groups' levels of prior offending, and implementation issues in the first year may have damaged the project. Theory may have been problematic as well since direct outreach to gangs has been associated with adverse effects in many interventions, including three of the six Spergel programs.

The Riverside evaluation corroborates Braga's (2016) observation that contemporary streetworker programs with mixed outcomes are sometimes declared "successes" (Braga, 2016; Spergel et al., 2006). While Braga attributes adverse effects in streetworker programs to theory failure, it seems difficult to distinguish between theory and implementation failure, when implementation fails repeatedly in streetworker programs. Do problems with worker effectiveness and interagency collaboration, common to many streetworker programs, indicate theory or implementation failure? Is the theory sound if half the trials produce beneficial effects, but half also produce adverse effects? Was it helpful, harmful, or both? It is impossible to know whether a more perfect implementation would have yielded fewer adverse effects since at no site were all core elements of the model strongly implemented (Spergel et al., 2006). Although Spergel et al. (2006) regarded Riverside as a success overall, the mixed outcomes, major implementation issues, measurement validity problems, and potential for theory failure due to street outreach suggest that any claims that the program was either successful or harmful are at best too simplistic.

13.4.4 Environmental Youth Corps: Mobile, AL (1992–1993)

Peters et al. (1996) evaluated the Environmental Youth Corp (EYC) in Mobile, Alabama, a 90-day military-style boot camp, compared to standard probation or residential placement for nonviolent youth offenders. The sample was all male, mostly African American, about half gang-involved, and considered high risk for reoffending. EYC focused on discipline, educational remediation, and community service, and included 6–9 months of reduced supervision aftercare. The evaluation found no overall differences in recidivism between EYC and control youth at 6 months; however, EYC youth were significantly faster to recidivate.

Was There Theory Failure? Yes. It is unclear whether any criminological, sociological, or psychological theory underpinned the intervention strategy. The authors

argue that “factors contributing to a delinquent lifestyle can be overcome through military-style discipline and structure, life skills training, educational remediation, and community service” (p. iii) and suggest that completing the mentally and physically challenging boot camp “was to be regarded as a significant personal victory” for youth (p. I-3).

Welsh and Rocque (2014) argue that boot camps may suffer from theory failure, since there is no evidence that discipline reduces recidivism. Similarly, a systematic review of 32 military-style boot camps found no overall differences in recidivism between boot camp participants and controls, with some studies finding better outcomes for controls and some for boot camp participants (Wilson et al., 2008). MacKenzie and Souryal (1994) suggested that boot camps may be harmful for the same reason as Scared Straight; the boot camp is meant to be a physically and emotionally unpleasant experience that deters future offending, but may backfire by provoking participants to prove they are “tough,” perhaps by reoffending (MacKenzie and Souryal, 1994).

EYC appears to have attempted to target youths’ needs, but may not have provided appropriately responsive services. Youth were extensively assessed for criminal and social history, substance use, home life, school performance, employment and life skills, and gang involvement, then given an individualized treatment plan to address their specific needs. The plans were to be revisited regularly and maintained through aftercare. However, there does not appear to have been any use of cognitive-behavioral principles in response to needs assessments, and the program targeted nonviolent offenders using a custodial intervention with the same length of stay for all participants, which may not have matched participants’ level of risk (Lowenkamp et al., 2006).

Was There Implementation Failure? Probably not. EYC appears to have been largely implemented as intended, providing a 90-day military-style boot camp focused on discipline and education remediation. Although there were implementation weaknesses, these were not related to discipline, the core intervention strategy. For example, 3-month reviews of individual treatment plans did not always occur as planned, the life skills coordinator did not use individual treatment plans to guide the development of the life skills curriculum, and drill instructors did not feel they had input into treatment plan development (p. II-22). Program coordinators were “fairly successful” in involving family members of EYC youth, but many parents were unable to attend the family aftercare program (p. II-22). EYC also suffered from high staff turnover due to poor pay and burnout.

Was There Measurement Failure? No. Peters et al. (1996) used a randomized experimental design, and no significant comparability problems emerged between groups. They measured EYC’s effectiveness using youths’ time to recidivate, defined as the number of days before youths’ first court-adjudicated new offense or probation violation, with EYC youth recidivating significantly faster. There were no significant group differences in severity of new adjudicated offenses or violations.

Conclusions Adverse effects in the Peters et al. (1996) EYC evaluation most likely reflect theory failure. The boot camp strategy seems to have relied on assumptions that discipline would reduce recidivism, which evidence does not support. In the absence of measurement and major implementation problems, theory failure seems likely and suggests EYC may have actually increased participants' recidivism.

13.5 Discussion

What lessons can we draw from studying adverse effects in gang-focused interventions? By exploring these effects, we aimed to shed light on their causes, and on the challenges of determining when adverse effects suggest programs are harmful or are simply artifacts of research design and measurement validity problems. Studying programs with adverse effects may also elucidate why effects occurred so that program developers and evaluators can reduce the likelihood of harm and flawed research designs in future studies. We were inspired by the growing body of research on harmful effects in crime prevention programs, including work by McCord (2003), Welsh and Rocque (2014), Barnett and Howard (2018), Braga (2016) and others.

Based on a systematic review of 41 controlled trials of individual-based gang interventions, we found eight studies with statistically significant effects that favored control groups. We examined whether failures of theory, implementation, or measurement may have caused adverse effects in four of these that exemplified a range of problems, and then hypothesized about whether they actually increased participants' antisocial behavior. We found that several factors likely contributed to adverse effects in gang-focused interventions, with most studies suffering from multiple types of failures. We relied both on what was reported in the studies themselves and on the relevant literature about similar programs to draw conclusions about each.

Consistent with the literature on intensive supervision, two intensive supervision programs for gang offenders in our sample found adverse effects that may have been due to measurement failure (Agopian, 1990; Wiebush et al., 2005). While these programs had other shortcomings as well, they both may have produced adverse effects because treatment groups were, in some key respects, monitored more closely than controls. For the Spergel program in Riverside (Spergel et al., 2005d), implementation and measurement validity problems in the evaluation may have led to the adverse effect for drug arrests. Finally, we speculated that the adverse effect in the EYC evaluation was due to theory failure (Peters et al., 1996), given similar results from other evaluations of boot camps for non-gang offenders.

By exploring what caused adverse effects, can we determine whether programs were actually harmful? We suggest that adverse effects due to implementation and theory failure provide stronger evidence for harm than measurement failure. When measurement failure is clear, adverse effects do not indicate either way whether a program was harmful.

13.5.1 Moving Forward: Adverse Effects in the Age of the Internet and Social Media

Lessons learned from these interventions are relevant even as evaluation strategies change with new technologies. The Internet and social media provide new ways to collect data about criminal activity (Trottier, 2012; Walsh & O'Connor, 2019), but may also increase the potential for adverse effects. A recent study of gang outreach workers' social media use illustrates both the promise and potential pitfalls of this new intervention tool. Patton, Eschmann, Elsaesser, and Bocanegra (2016) interviewed outreach workers in Chicago who described using social media to monitor gang activities, build trust with youth, and intervene in escalating online beefs (Patton et al., 2016). The workers described how gang members friending them online helped enhance the closeness of their relationships. It was also helpful for suppression, since social media often provided access to logs of youths' current and past illegal behaviors. The interviews suggest social media has potential as a tool to monitor behaviors and intervention outcomes.

However, social media may also increase the risk for adverse effects due to measurement failure and by potentially encouraging unnecessary intervention. The outreach workers in Patton et al. (2016) noted that interpreting youths' online activity often required "insider knowledge" (p. 594). One described the fatal shooting of a boy who posted a picture of himself on Facebook with "his hat tilted to the side," which apparently indicated his gang membership and provoked the shooting. Workers also described how youth exaggerated their criminal behaviors online, taking credit for others' violence, or posting pictures and videos with fistfuls of cash, drugs, and guns they did not actually own. Workers who knew the gangs understood which posts reflected real events and which seemingly innocuous posts were real threats. It is easy to imagine how researchers could misinterpret social media posts (particularly for control groups not served by providers who know them well) and risk unnecessary or harmful intervention, measurement failure, or both.

Future research should explore how to use social media for intervention evaluations while minimizing the potential for adverse effects. Questions remain about how to optimize the Internet for good data collection: can viewing gangs' threatening videos for data collection socially reinforce youth by increasing the number of views (Storrod & Densley, 2017)? Can outreach workers erroneously intervene with youth on the street based on misleading online posts (Patton et al., 2016; Walsh & O'Connor, 2019)? Does supervising online gang behavior increase the likelihood of measurement failure? Future research should carefully consider these unknowns involved in using new technologies in interventions.

Recommendations Determining which intervention effects are true effects in controlled studies can be challenging, and several kinds of evidence are needed. Here we provide a set of recommendations for designing evaluations that maximize confidence that measured outcomes reflect real intervention effects:

1. *Ground interventions in evidence-based theory* from psychology, sociology, criminology, or related fields, and avoid untested “common sense” strategies (Andrews & Dowden, 2005). If a theory underpins other successful interventions, adverse effects that emerge may be less likely due to theory failure than to another problem. Without good scientific theory, even when a program is successful, it is more difficult to determine *why* it worked. Crimesolutions.gov is a good resource for checking intervention effects and theory (Crimesolutions.gov, 2019; Worrall, 2015). Experts at Crimesolutions.gov rate programs based on theoretical framework, outcome evidence, design quality, and program fidelity, using multiple evaluations of the same program and meta-analyses (Crimesolutions.gov, 2019).
2. *Measure intervention fidelity*. For example, national evaluators monitored the Spergel model programs at all sites, tracking services and contacts with program youth, and interviewing providers about implementation successes and challenges. As a result, Spergel et al. (2006) could test whether higher-risk youth in fact received more intensive services than lower-risk youth, as the model intended. Peters et al. (1996) also interviewed drill instructors from the EYC boot camp, which revealed several problems with fidelity (but none that clearly impacted the core intervention strategy).
3. *Measure outcomes similarly for treatment and control groups*. Surveillance methods and intensity should be the same for treatment and control groups in outcome evaluations, since differences can change the likelihood of detecting outcomes across groups and risk producing false-positives. Social media can improve surveillance, since youth often post video evidence of illegal behavior on public platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Patton et al., 2016; Storrod & Densley, 2017). However, Monitoring gang activity online in controlled evaluations will likely pose challenges, and future research should take care that frequency, intensity, and also ability to interpret online activity are similar across groups.
4. *Use multiple measures for the same outcome constructs*, such as time to first arrest, proportion arrested, and self-reported offenses for recidivism (Mackenzie & De Li, 2002). While the number of arrests is an often-used measure of recidivism, it primarily measures justice system contact and fails to capture the majority of offenses (Gramlich, 2019; Mackenzie & De Li, 2002). Supplementing official arrest rates with other measures may help reduce validity problems associated with relying on the number of arrests as the primary outcome.
5. *Test mediators and confounds*. If researchers specify and track services and contacts (e.g., Spergel et al., 2006), they can test whether exposure to the hypothesized active ingredients improves the likelihood of positive outcomes, gaining stronger evidence that the intervention itself was effective. Testing known confounds for delinquency, such as age, helps isolate program effects as well.

In conclusion, multiple factors contribute to adverse effects in evaluations of gang-focused interventions, and these effects do not always indicate that programs are harmful. We hope that researchers, policy makers, and practitioners can use this

information when making decisions about how to address gang problems in their communities and measure program outcomes.

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Chapter 14

Moral Disengagement and Gangs



Miriam Dyberg-Tengroth and Vincent Egan

Moral psychology is the application of psychology to morality. It involves looking at concepts and processes such as moral development and moral reasoning. One of the challenges in this field is defining and quantifying morality. Values change over time and are prone to bias, which raises the question: Who is right about what is right or wrong? The field of gang research is rife with morally relevant questions, such as the debates surrounding the distribution of funds for prevention versus intervention, whether “street code” constitutes a form of morality,¹ to what extent social media should be policed, the impact of grime music,² etc. But given that these debates are still developing, what is the role and usefulness of moral psychology within the field of gang research? To understand the potential of this field, it is useful to briefly visit the past and present of moral psychology as applied to antisocial behaviour generally, and gangs specifically. In accordance with the Eurogang definition of gang membership, this chapter will focus on juvenile and young adult populations (Weerman et al., 2010).

¹Street code describes a set of informal rules that dictate gang members’ conduct and status. See Matsuda, Melde, Taylor, Freng, & Esbensen, 2012.

²Grime music originated in London, UK, during the early 2000s. It is a form of electronic dance music that grew out of garage and jungle, distinguishing itself lyrically through its focus on the gritty, “grim(e)y” reality of urban life, notably in London’s council estates (Barron, 2013; Bramwell, 2015a, 2015b; Fatsis 2019). There has been historic and ongoing debate around grime’s link to crime despite the genre gaining mainstream recognition in the United Kingdom (Fatsis, 2019; Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018).

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14.1 Moral Psychology and Antisocial Behaviour

Considering the theoretical dimension of moral psychology is important because it informs attempts to understand antisocial behaviour, in turn enabling the effective design of prevention and intervention programmes to address the behaviour. Palmer's book on moral reasoning, criminal conduct and the rehabilitation of offenders divides psychological theories of offending behaviour into five categories: psychobiological, psychodynamic, learning, cognitive-behavioural and control theories (Palmer, 2003). Within these, different psychological approaches to understanding morality and moral processes can be applied in order to understand antisocial behaviour. Currently, two of the more commonly cited models are cognitive-developmental theory and social cognitive theory.

Cognitive-developmental theory proposes that moral development stems from cognitive structures and judgments derived from social interactions. The extent to which an individual is exposed to such interactions, and the quality of those interactions, influences the level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984). Kohlberg, a pioneer in this school of thought, believed his model to be culturally universal but was criticised for the model being biased by its justice-centeredness. Other theorists have attempted to address some of these criticisms through revisions to Kohlberg's theory, notably Gibbs' theory of sociomoral reasoning and the Minnesotan neo-Kohlbergian theory (Gibbs, 1979; Gibbs, Basinger, & Fuller, 1992; Palmer, 2003; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000).

Gibbs adapted Kohlberg's original stages of sociomoral development into two phases: immature and mature. An adolescent or adult within the immature phase would be considered morally delayed, while those in the mature phase would be considered to function at universally normal levels of sociomoral reasoning (Gibbs, 1993). In his chapter for the *Gang Intervention Handbook*, Gibbs argued that while delays to moral development within this model result in immature or superficial moral judgment or egocentric bias (me-centredness), this alone is insufficient to lead to severe or criminal antisocial behaviour without additional defensive processes to protect the individual from psychological distress. Gibbs suggests that social information processing theory can take account of this and complement sociomoral reasoning theory because both are cognitive (Gibbs, 1993). Based on the premise that all individuals have some degree of empathic disposition and drive to avoid cognitive dissonance (i.e., inconsistent or contradictory thoughts and ways of thinking) in order to prevent psychological stress, it is suggested that certain overriding cognitive mechanisms are necessary to allow antisocial behaviour to occur (Dodge, 1986). Cognitive distortions (i.e., inaccurate cognitions that are often irrational and/or exaggerated) are among these mechanisms and can cover a variety of self-serving systems. Gibbs identifies that such distortions may be primary (i.e., self-serving and egocentric) or secondary, with secondary distortions also being termed "rationalisations" (Sykes & Matza, 1957). He goes on to link this directly to social cognitive theory, with rationalisations paralleling "moral disengagement" (Bandura, 1991; Gibbs, 1993).

Another revision of Kohlberg's theory was formulated by four theorists affiliated with the University of Minnesota: Rest, Narvaez, Thoma and Bebeau. Based on data collected over 25 years, their approach takes a broader view of moral development, looking at both the content and structure of moral reasoning. The revision rejects the hard stages of Kohlberg's model, using the concept of "moral schemas" rather than "moral stages." Instead of looking at moral development as culturally universal, this model considers common morality. Common morality posits that morality is a social construct built and voiced by a community through a discourse, forming an equilibrium between the community's ideals and moral intuitions. As such, common morality is relative to different communities, though certain developmental constructs bridge across this relativity (Narvaez, 2005; Rest et al., 2000). Both the cognitive and social aspects of these revisions to Kohlberg's theory provide complementary links to the social cognitive theory of moral reasoning, as the name suggests.

Bandura's social cognitive theory provides a greater focus on how moral reasoning translates into behaviour than the above cognitive-developmental theories. While Kohlberg posited that moral reasoning motivates moral behaviour, Bandura argues that moral reasoning is insufficient to effect such motivation. His theory suggests an additional factor: moral agency. Bandura states that moral agency, our moral self-image and self-reflection, is expressed through the interaction of self-regulatory processes and mechanisms with moral reasoning which translates into actions (Reynolds, Dang, Yam, & Leavitt, 2014). This is where moral disengagement comes in.

14.1.1 Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is defined by Bandura as the "cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into benign or worthy [behaviour]" (Bandura, 2002 p. 101). It comprises eight components, each with related but unique mechanisms for dissociating from self-sanctions and often responsibility: moral justification (claiming a moral purpose for behaviour); euphemistic labelling (using less severe language to sanitise actions and outcomes); advantageous comparison (minimising behaviour by comparing it to more severe behaviour); diffusion of responsibility (negating individual accountability by placing responsibility on the "whole"); displacement of responsibility (placing responsibility on an authority figure); distortion of consequences (transforming the perception of consequences, generally to minimise or disregard their impact); attribution of blame (placing blame on another party); and dehumanisation (objectifying the victim, thus nullifying the application of moral standards and empathy to them).

Bandura described a schematisation of the psychosocial mechanisms through which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from antisocial behaviours such as aggression and violence. The schematisation highlights three points during the exercise of moral agency at which disengagement can occur: the behaviour

locus, agency locus and outcome locus. Moral justification, advantageous comparison and euphemistic labelling work at the behaviour locus, which transforms the individual's view of the antisocial behaviour itself. Displacement and diffusion of responsibility operate at the agency locus, transforming the individual's perception of their accountability for the antisocial behaviour. Lastly, distortion of consequences, attribution of blame and dehumanisation work at the outcome locus by transforming the individual's perception of the antisocial behaviour's outcome, either regarding its impact or the victim. These transformations allow moral disengagement to facilitate antisocial behaviour by overcoming self-sanctions (Bandura, 2007). Given the high rates of delinquent behaviour among gang youth, such concepts link naturally to the turbulent concept of youth gangs and how we understand their antisocial behaviour (Melde & Esbensen, 2013; Melde, Esbensen, & Carson, 2016; Pyrooz & Decker, 2013).

In trying to explain juvenile antisocial behaviour through a moral lens, a delay or lack of moral judgment is often proposed. A meta-analysis on the moral judgment of juvenile delinquents found that developmentally delayed moral judgment is strongly associated with juvenile delinquency, even when socioeconomic status, gender, age and intelligence are controlled for (Stams et al., 2006). Research has found that moral development can help to differentiate between offending and non-offending youths, with moral reasoning being negatively correlated with delinquency, but only for males (Beerthuizen, Brugman, & Basinger, 2013; Chen & Howitt, 2007). Research has also indicated that lower moral development can facilitate aggression and/or antisocial behaviour (Lardén, Melin, Holst, & Långström, 2006; Palmer, 2005). As moral development is often stunted in delinquents and facilitates antisocial behaviour, it follows that youths in gangs (with their increased likelihood of criminal activity) might also lag behind in moral development. It is possible that moral disengagement facilitates delays or gaps in delinquent moral development; or that moral disengagement gives juvenile offenders a greater adeptness at disengaging self-sanctions, such as shame and anxiety, regardless of their moral development. One may argue that moral disengagement is a form of cognitive distortion, or that it mediates them: its mechanisms allow for inaccurate cognitions that alleviate cognitive dissonance and facilitate antisocial behaviour, like the defences Gibbs argues are needed for moral reasoning delays to lead to offending behaviour. Shulman proposes two distinct pathways by which morally disengaged attitudes develop: through frequent instances of disengaging internal sanctions by justifying misbehaviour; or as a consequence of callous unemotional traits. Dhingra and colleagues' work could support both pathways for gang members (Dhingra, Debowska, Sharratt, Hyland, & Kola-Palmer, 2014; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011). This complements findings that delinquents score significantly lower for theory of mind, empathetic understanding and moral reasoning compared to the control group in a study which also found a positive association between theory of mind, empathetic understanding and moral reasoning. Such associations might help to explain how delinquents, and specifically gang members, can employ moral disengagement more readily than their peers (Spenser, Betts, & Das Gupta, 2015).

Moral disengagement has been found to influence antisocial behaviour directly and by disinhibiting aggression to reduce pro-social behaviour and guilt (Bandura, 2002; Dhingra et al., 2014). It is associated with, and predictive of, offending in adolescents, even after adjusting for callous-unemotional traits as a potential confound (Dhingra et al., 2014; Shulman et al., 2011). Additionally, moral disengagement is associated with dark triad qualities such as psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Egan, Hughes, & Palmer, 2015). There is a growing empirical base suggesting that online environments may be particularly conducive to moral disengagement. For example, cyberbullying is associated with moral disengagement, and moral disengagement has been found to be predictive of cyberbullying (Bussey, Fitzpatrick, & Raman, 2015; Orue & Calvete, 2019). Multiple professionals in the United Kingdom have described how online activity can become a catalyst or even a trigger for real life violence and consequences in a gang context, but have not yet explored moral disengagement's role (e.g. Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Storrod & Densley, 2017). The relationship of moral disengagement to gangs, both on the streets and online, may be more complex.

Research indicates that being a gang member is predictive of higher levels of moral disengagement even after controlling for age, gender, witnessing violence, victimisation and psychopathy; but moral disengagement is not predictive of gang membership (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Dhingra et al., 2014; Dyberg & Egan, 2019; Niebieszczanski, Harkins, Judson, Smith, & Dixon, 2015). Further exploration of moral disengagement within gangs found that dehumanisation has a mediating effect on the relationship between gang membership and violent behaviour (Alleyne, Fernandes, & Pritchard, 2014). The effect of the dehumanisation component of moral disengagement suggests gang members' perceptions of others is key to their moral disengagement which, partially, could explain how they engage in violence. It also raises the question of whether moral disengagement as a general concept is too broad to describe the mechanisms that facilitate antisocial behaviour among gang members. Existing research provides an outline of moral functioning in delinquents and loosely of young gang members, but further exploration of the psychological processes associated with gang membership is necessary before more meaningful and comprehensive conclusions can be drawn. Looking at more intricate moral processes can help to shape future prevention and intervention programmes for gang members, refining their focus and increasing their efficacy.

14.1.2 Discriminant Moral Disengagement

One previously unexplored area with gang members is the concept of discriminant moral disengagement: when moral disengagement varies based on specific situations or targets. This is still a largely unexplored concept empirically, despite its conceptual overlap with selective moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002). It was coined in Dyberg & Egan's, 2015 study, which found that those who use sex workers have similar levels of general moral disengagement to non-users, but heightened

levels of moral disengagement specifically towards sex workers, appearing to apply cognitive discrimination to moral disengagement. This concept has yet to be explored explicitly in other studies but may apply to gang members neutralising cognitions towards common victims, such as outgroups and females (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; De La Rue & Espilage, 2014; Harris, Turner, Garrett, & Atkinson, 2011; Home Office, 2016; Mares, 2001; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Ulloa, Dyson, & Wynes, 2012; Vasquez, Wenborne, Peers, Alleyne, & Ellis, 2015). The term “selective moral disengagement” has been used before, sometimes vaguely, and discussed theoretically in how moral disengagement can be activated selectively to facilitate antisocial behaviour by otherwise “moral” individuals but to date has not been measured as an independent and targeted phenomenon (Bandura, 2002, 2007, 2012). As such, it is worth noting that while the measure of the construct and some of the language around discriminant moral disengagement is new, the theoretical basis itself is not necessarily. In this chapter the term “discriminant moral disengagement” will continue to be used to facilitate continuity and distinguish the explicit measuring of a targeted process from the more ambiguous concept still related to the measure of general moral disengagement.

Dyberg explored the concept of discriminant moral disengagement by adjusting Detert and colleagues’ Moral Disengagement Scale to specifically address outgroups and females; both scales were found to have good validity and reliability (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Dyberg & Egan, 2019). Forty-seven males aged 13–18 known to Youth Offending Services in England completed the study. Participants were asked to complete a series of questionnaires including a truncated Eurogang Youth Survey, the Moral Disengagement Scale, the Attitudes Towards Women Scale for Adolescents (AWSA) and the adjusted discriminant moral disengagement scales either through interview or written format (Detert et al., 2008; Galambos, Petersen, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985; Weerman et al., 2009). About 72.3% of participants chose to have the survey administered orally, 21.3% chose the written format and 6.4% used a combination of the two. The method of administration had no significant impact on results (Dyberg & Egan, 2019). Based on their answers to the Eurogang Youth Survey participants were sorted into three groups: non-gang, possible gang member/affiliation and gang member (Weerman et al., 2009).

Discriminant moral disengagement towards outgroups (DMDO) was found to be significantly related to gang membership, with gang members exhibiting higher levels of discriminant moral disengagement towards outgroups than non-gang members ($F(2,44) = 6.272, p < 0.005$). General moral disengagement and DMDO were found to be positively correlated, but without significant agreement, indicating the measures are distinct from one another despite their relationship ($r = 0.720$ (two-tailed), $p < 0.001$; $\kappa = -0.003, p > 0.05$). Post hoc analyses revealed the statistical power for this portion of the study was 0.822 with a calculated effect size of 0.141 (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

Gang membership was found not to have a significant effect on attitudes towards women and discriminant moral disengagement towards females (DMDF) ($V = 0.198, F(4,86) = 2.359, p > 0.05$), although separate analyses indicated a significant effect

on attitudes and a trend towards significance for DMDF ($F(2) = 4.428, p < 0.05$; $F(2) = 0.566, p = 0.057$). The DMDF scale was found to have good convergent validity with the attitudes towards women scale for adolescents ($r_s = -0.539, p < 0.001$). Post hoc analyses revealed the statistical power for this portion of the study was 0.694, suggesting the sample size needed to be 57 to have confidence in the negative findings (to reach a statistical power of 0.803) (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

While there are limitations to Dyberg and Egan's study, such as the sample size, it is worth considering the preliminary implications of these exploratory findings, each of which merits further exploration in their own right. In relation to Shulman's proposed pathways to moral disengagement, discriminant moral disengagement would theoretically be more likely to result from social processes and group culture promoting the first pathway, or in some way endorsing callous-unemotional traits as status-boosting within the group. Either way, it seems likely to be a group process as much as an individual development process. Examining collective moral disengagement, the process through which a group's shared beliefs morally justify anti-social behaviour could therefore be a beneficial way of building on our understanding of discriminant moral disengagement and gang morality (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014). Collective processes would be consistent with, and potentially help to explain, the enhancement model of gang membership's interaction with offending behaviour: that gang members offend prior to joining a gang, but gang membership increases the frequency and variety of their offending (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). For DMDF, professionals across all domains must be careful not to draw conclusions regarding gang members' attitudes towards females before more conclusive results are established, as the dynamic suggested by the exploratory results is more complex than initially expected. Although with limitations, the results currently suggest another mechanism might be responsible for or interacting with any moral processes facilitating gang violence towards girls; or perhaps that within a delinquent sample there are similar gender norms across groups. It may be antisocial peer groups in general, rather than gangs, heighten risk within an English context and that this could differ in other cultures. If so, it is possible all delinquents are similarly inclined towards certain attitudes towards women and DMDF individually, but become polarised within groups. It would also be interesting to see if the Madonna-whore dichotomy (i.e., viewing women as "good" and pure or "bad" and impure) from Dyberg and Egan's earlier study is replicated in gangs, considering that literature has already described gang members viewing females either as "good girls" or "dirty girls/ hoodrats" (Cepeda & Valdez, 2003; Newbold & Dennehy, 2003). Males may even take on different roles around females depending on how they perceive them, perhaps being "protectors" of good girls and "playboys" around dirty girls. Future studies may usefully seek to examine this specifically, rather than DMDF generally (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

It would also be useful to look at whether online gang behaviour is influenced by moral disengagement processes. Although not gang-related, US study found that when viewing entertainment media, the viewer's perceived similarities to the character predicted [discriminant] moral disengagement towards the character's antisocial behaviour. Perceived similarities also mediated the impact of identification on

moral disengagement towards the character's behaviour. In turn, greater moral disengagement allowed for greater affective, but not cognitive, enjoyment of the character's narrative. In other words, when a viewer felt that they were similar to a character, and particularly if they identified with them, they were more likely to morally disengage to justify the character's antisocial actions, allowing the viewer to enjoy the narrative more emotionally, but not prompting them to analyse or seek out more information about the narrative (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Another US study found that [discriminant] moral disengagement about cyberbullying is predictive of cyberbullying involvement and "traditional" (real-life) bullying (Meter & Bauman, 2018). These studies raise opportunities to explore and understand how gang activity in the cyber realm impacts gang members and non-members, both on- and offline. For instance, perceived similarities and identification with gang members' social media might prompt non-members to morally disengage towards gang activity and facilitate future involvement. It might also allow viewers to watch the media and affectively enjoy the content without questioning it, avoiding moral quandaries and cognitive dissonance.

Discriminant moral disengagement can help to account for how gang members are able to hold and act upon apparently different moral codes dependent on their environment (for example, with their biological family versus gang family). Further study can help to illuminate whether prevention and intervention work should not only target moral development, but address means through which such development might be disengaged towards specific targets.

14.2 Moral Interventions

Gang membership is positively correlated with delinquency and violence, both of which are very costly issues for society (Melde & Esbensen, 2013; Pyrooz, Turanovic, Decker, & Wu, 2015). As stated above, previous studies have established the link between various dimensions of morality and antisocial behaviour, finding higher levels of moral disengagement in offenders compared with the general public, and possibly in gang versus non-gang youth (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Emler & Reicher, 1995). Correspondingly, decreases in reported moral disengagement speeds decline in self-reported antisocial behaviour (even when controlling for callous-unemotional traits) and are associated with a decreased likelihood of offending (Shulman et al., 2011). Targeting moral disengagement or its components has been raised as a theoretically sound investment to tackle delinquency, either as an enhancement to existing interventions or as an intervention in its own right; as have promoting moral development and moral reasoning (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Dhingra et al., 2014; Gibbs, 1993; Lardén et al., 2006; Palmer, 2007).

There are a wide range of "gang interventions" and reviews examining their efficacy across various domains; however, despite growing interest in the psychological processes underlying gangs, such as moral disengagement, there had

previously not been a review of interventions specifically targeting relevant processes (Cooper & Ward, 2008; Esbensen, 2000; Fisher, Montgomery, & Gardner, 2008; Gilbert & Newbold, 2006; Hodgkinson et al., 2009; Huey, Lewine, & Rubenson, 2016; Klein & Maxson, 2006; O'Connor & Waddell, 2015; Wong, Gravel, Bouchard, Descormiers, & Morselli, 2016; Wong, Gravel, Bouchard, Morselli, & Descormiers, 2012). Consequently, moral interventions targeting anti-social behaviour in general will be summarised to illustrate their usefulness before a review of moral interventions on gang populations (or the lack thereof) is presented.

14.2.1 For Antisocial Behaviour

In recent years, offender rehabilitation from a psychological perspective has been dominated by the Good Lives Model (GLM), which is a strengths-based approach to reducing offending behaviour. The model aims to equip individuals with the tools to lead a good life: one which is socially acceptable and personally meaningful. The GLM argues that all people strive for excellence in primary human goods, with our values informing what importance and priority we place on each of these goods (such as inner peace and community). Offending results from flawed pursuits of these primary goods to achieve a good life (Willis & Ward, 2013). For example, in seeking out community and the associated sense of belonging (a primary human good), an individual might perceive that joining a gang will meet this need and is a more viable option than joining another group that is more likely to reject them. In order to maintain their community through gang membership, the individual might engage in criminal acts. Dependent on your view of morality and moral development, an individual's relationship to morality can influence several primary goods such as inner peace ("Am I doing what is right? Am I a good person?"), community ("Does my community accept my actions, and by proxy me?"), spirituality ("What values align with my faith or give me purpose and meaning in life?") and relatedness ("How does my morality relate to those I am close to and impact on our connectedness?"). Online interactions, and their impact on perceived similarities and identification, may also help to meet this need for belongingness. Considering the theoretical dimension, as stated above, informs our attempts to understand antisocial behaviour, which in turn enables us to design effective prevention and intervention programmes to address such behaviour. For example, building on the above GLM example, an effective intervention would seek to provide the individual with a strong prosocial community as an alternative to their gang. There is preliminary evidence supporting the model's usefulness in addressing antisocial behaviour; Mallion and Wood are currently examining the model's relevance to gangs in a UK population (Loney & Harkins, 2018; Mallion & Wood, 2018; Willis & Ward, 2013).

In terms of programmes rather than models addressing antisocial behaviour's development through a moral lens, there are several that arguably touch on moral components through other skill-based interventions, such as decision making and

victim impact work. This section will focus on some notable examples explicitly targeting morality in some capacity.

Moral reconnection therapy (MRT) is directly based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development and aims to raise the moral reasoning level of participants through group and workbook exercises (Finn, 1998). MRT has been found to have a small but significant impact on recidivism. Overall, MRT has reportedly been more successful with adults than juvenile offenders, but it should be noted that the intervention was designed to reach treatment-resistant populations and has had some success in doing so (Ferguson & Wormith, 2012; Little & Robinson, 1988). MRT has been suggested for use with gang populations and has been used with juvenile populations including gang members but still lacks a gang-specific evidence base (Whitbeck, 2010).

Equipping Youth to Help One Another [EQUIP] also has an explicit moral component, but despite its efficacy in improving sociomoral reasoning and to a lesser extent in reducing recidivism in violent juveniles, EQUIP has never been trialled with a gang specific population; at least not in a trial resulting in a published evaluation (Gibbs, 1993; van Stam et al., 2014). EQUIP applies a cognitive behavioural approach in a peer group setting to support participants to help each other develop (or equip themselves with) the skills to act and think more responsibly (van Stam et al., 2014).

Other cognitive behavioural programmes with explicit moral components have helped to reduce antisocial and offending behaviour (see Lipsey, Landenberger, & Wilson, 2007). It is also worth noting that cognitive behavioural programmes are amongst the most effective for reducing recidivism in both adult and adolescent offender populations (Lipsey et al., 2007). The above evidence provides a reasonable basis to argue that moral interventions for antisocial behaviour can boost socio-moral development and reasoning. Some programmes also effectively reduce recidivism, while others are less consistent with recidivist outcomes. It is possible that interventions more effective in reducing antisocial behaviour better target moral disengagement and other supplemental defences that facilitate the translation of moral deficits and delays into antisocial behaviour, though this has yet to be empirically examined.

14.2.2 For Gangs

Dyberg and Egan conducted a systematic review seeking to establish the quantity and quality of evidence on the efficacy of interventions with a moral component for reducing violent behaviour in gang-involved youth (2019). To be included, studies needed to meet the following criteria: (a) a majority of the population consists of males under 18 (those at highest risk for joining a gang); (b) intervention includes a

moral component³; (c) measures violence-related individual outcome; (d) be published between 2010 and 2018; (e) be based in an occident country and available in English; (f) utilizes a non-clinical sample. Language and geographic area were limited to ensure reasonable cultural consistency and allow for more meaningful comparisons (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

The systematic review identified eight papers detailing seven different programmes that addressed gang violence through prevention/intervention programmes which included moral components. None of the programmes were morally based. The following studies were included: Bloomington-Normal Comprehensive Gang Program (Bloomington), Environmental Youth Corps (EYC), Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT II), Growing Against Gangs and Violence (GAGV), Gang Prevention/Intervention Through Targeted Outreach (GPTTO/GITTO), Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP), and the San Antonio Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention/Gang Rehabilitation, Assessment and Service Program (San Antonio) (Arbreton & McClanahan, 2002; Densley, Adler, Zhu, & Lambine, 2017; Dyberg & Egan, 2019; Esbensen, Osgood, Peterson, Taylor, & Carson, 2013; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Osgood, 2012; Hritz & Gabow, 1997; Peters, 1996; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005a, 2005b).

A second reviewer was consulted to ensure the included studies objectively met review thresholds. Of the included studies, four came from journals and four were government-published reports. Four of the included papers had experimental designs (randomised controlled trials; EYC, GAGV, both papers on GREAT II), three had quasi-experimental designs (Bloomington, GPTTO/GITTO, San Antonio) and the remaining study was a longitudinal within-group comparison (GRASP). Three programmes were prevention-focused (GAGV, GPTTO, GREAT II) and five were intervention-focused (Bloomington, EYC, GITTO, GRASP, San Antonio), although there was some overlap between the two focuses. All studies were based in the United States of America with the exception of GAGV, which was piloted in England. Although some studies examined programmes not specifically intended for a gang population, all included a description of how many gang-involved youth were included in the study, with most using self-nomination to determine membership, and others using professional records or judgments (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

Considerable variation was found in how moral components were phrased and incorporated throughout the studies. Three included components to address moral disengagement (GAGV and GREAT II), while the others sought to promote mainstream morality and/or challenge gang morality. Three papers specifically referred to a form of the word “moral” (excluding moral disengagement) and four referred to “values” in a moral context. None of the publications were designed to measure the impact of their moral component specifically, instead focusing on the intended outcomes of the respective programmes as wholes. Violent arrests or offending were the most commonly used violence-related outcome measures with six studies

³Purposeful inclusion of a moral component was determined by whether a publication explicitly referred to a process or phrase including the word “moral” within their intervention description.

measuring such behaviour, the other two used carrying a weapon and violence-related injuries as measures. Seven of the studies employed a self-report measure in some format, and three used official records (for two of them as supplements to self-report data). Most of the interventions were not effective in decreasing violence but reported success in other areas, such as increasing prosocial behaviour. GREAT II, GPTTO/GITTO and GAGV reported partial improvements, but GRASP was the only intervention to report clear success through a decrease in violence-related injuries. While GRASP results were encouraging, the authors identified the need for a larger more in-depth evaluation of the programme to be conducted (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

The review also sought to examine existing evidence to identify areas which require further exploration in order to establish the usefulness of morality as a mechanism in prevention and behaviour-targeted work. While the programmes reviewed included moral components, they did not present the theoretical basis behind the components, only naming them and at most providing brief descriptions. For instance, GREAT II included attitudinal measures with clear links to morality and moral disengagement (such as lying neutralisations and empathy), but the mechanisms underlying these outcomes were not explored in any depth. As such, there is still a gap in and between the moral intervention literature and gang interventions (Dyberg & Egan, 2019).

Quality considerations present additional issues, as some interventions with strong moral overtones have been applied but underreported, such as GRASP or ART, whose gang trial was too vague to be included in this review (Goldstein & Glick, 1994). Aggression Replacement Training [ART] explicitly aims to develop moral reasoning and is regarded as an effective intervention for promoting prosocial behaviour in chronically aggressive and violent youth. ART was trialled with gang members and produced promising, albeit underreported, results (Goldstein & Glick, 1994; OJJDP, 2018). While the OJJDP identifies the programme as being effective in reducing recidivism and problem behaviours while boosting moral reasoning, a recent systematic review questions these assertions, suggesting that a more independent investigation of its efficacy is warranted (Brännström, Kaunitz, Andershed, South, & Smedslund, 2016).

Given the limited emphasis on morality in the reviewed studies, despite their moral components, their efficacy actually reveals very little about the impact moral programmes might have on violent behaviour in gang populations. Only a limited literature exists regarding gang prevention and intervention with moral components, which is somewhat unexpected given that it was proposed decades ago. Gibbs's chapter in *The Gang Intervention Handbook* (1993) remains the best example of a theoretical discussion on how morally informed programmes might successfully be applied to gangs, yet the chapter (and even the book) is not cited in any of the studies reviewed. This is probably because none of the papers set out to implement a moral intervention; but following Gibbs's chapter and the promising pilot of ART with gang youth, the question remains: why has no one piloted and written about such a programme? Particularly given the interest in moral disengagement in gang research over recent years, and with major interventions such as GREAT II and GAGV acknowledging moral disengagement, it is puzzling that no attempt has been

made to target the phenomenon or the concept at its core (Alleyne et al., 2014; Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Niebieszczanski et al., 2015; Wood, Alleyne, Mozova, & James, 2015). Further analysis is needed regarding the efficacy of moral components, specifically within these programs. The efficacy of the components could be weighed against results for non-gang programmes with strong moral components and Gibbs's discussion on what components are needed for an effective moral intervention to inform a programme design (Gibbs, 1993).

Given the inconsistent recognition and investment in addressing gang problems, it is unsurprising that other countries have very few programmes (even currently) compared with the US which has recognised gang issues for a significantly longer length of time. The US has recently had a wealth of outcome studies and evidence reviews for gang prevention and intervention (such as Howell, 2010 and Huey et al., 2016), yet none have explored moral components within interventions. It may be that morality's potential controversy, across the spectrum of political, religious and cultural spheres, for example, has made it less popular in gang work, despite the success of ART and EQUIP with general delinquent populations (Goldstein & Glick, 1994; OJJDP, 2018; van Stam et al., 2014). Gangs in the United States are often dominated by ethnic minorities, which may make a primarily Caucasian research base uneasy about pursuing morality-based interventions. Alternatively, moral interventions may not have been championed or fashionable enough to have attracted adequate funding. Either way, the low quantity of moral programmes inherently decreases the chance of high-quality evaluations being produced from a morally focused stance. Non-morally focussed studies will be of lower quality in a morally focused review by design. This creates a rich space for discussion on the need for and future possibilities around morally informed gang interventions.

Overall, while promising evidence exists for moral interventions to target violence in general delinquent populations, the evidence is sparse for gang youth. For a more in-depth discussion, see Dyberg & Egan, 2019.

14.2.3 Online Policing

It is debatable to what extent policing interventions constitute a moral intervention, but they unquestionably involve several dimensions of morality, such as the societal morality of policies and laws, the community morality of the neighbourhoods being policed and individual morality. Sometimes the values and actions of these stakeholders clash. As policing extends online, so are many of the debates arising from such clashes. For example, the criminalisation of grime, and more recently UK drill,⁴ music has drawn discussion. The Metropolitan Police's Gangs Matrix was

⁴Drill music originated in Chicago's South Side during the early 2010s. After starting to gain mainstream attention in 2012, drill gained prominence in London. The subgenre UK drill has been called "the new grime" by some, but is regarded as focusing more on violence and crime as a way of life (Thapar, 2017).

criticised, amongst other things, for using grime music videos and social media to identify potential gang members. Amnesty International criticised the Matrix for targeting individuals based on their (sub)cultural expression, arguing that the Matrix profiled black boys and young men, and that it violated subjects' privacy (Amnesty International, 2018). While experts have cautioned that musical expression and entrepreneurship should not be confused with criminal activity, they have also raised that the online activity of gangs is linked with offline antisocial behaviour and merits some form of intervention, either by police or social media platforms (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Storrod & Densley, 2017). Social media has been used to both prevent and prosecute gang crimes successfully, but there is no universal guidance on when monitoring crosses from police work to invasion of privacy.

Policing online may also impact police officers. If social media facilitates moral disengagement in gang members, might it do the same to police officers? If so, it would be interesting to observe to what degree such moral disengagement was generalised or discriminant. It is also plausible that some of the material posted could elicit moral disgust or anger in those viewing it. Such cognitive mechanisms could impact group and individual approaches to policing, potentially increasing the likelihood for police to challenge a boundary that they have disengaged from, but which their community is still invested in.

14.3 The Place of Morality Within Gang Research and Interventions: Future Directions?

Earlier, this chapter posed the question: Given that several gang-related moral debates are still developing, what is the role and usefulness of moral psychology within the field of gang research? One possible answer lies within the question itself—suggesting further development to inform these debates, and possibly even resolve some of them. For instance, does grime or other music associated with gang culture influence moral disengagement and violence by proxy? What about social media? There has been increased discussion about policing grime music, particularly on social media, similar to the discourse regarding whether video games facilitate or cause violence. Examining the moral impact of grime can help to clarify whether concern about the genre is truly warranted. After all, it is not that long ago that rap was cast in a similar light, while it is now widely accepted and incorporated across genres.

Continued research is the logical starting point for the relevance of moral psychology within gang research and practice, as several interesting questions have been raised but not yet fully addressed by the literature. An empirically supported greater understanding of how gangs map on to moral theories, for instance, could facilitate advances in research and practice. Some questions may be harder to quantify but nonetheless require answering. For instance, within the concept of common morality would common elements of street code qualify as a community's

morality? Are national and international gangs not communities in their own right? If so, how does this impact our assessment of morality; particularly if we look beyond structure to the more culturally malleable content? Research on moral disengagement is pioneering the way for moral psychology in gang work but is not enough on its own for moral psychology to sustain a meaningful role or contribution in the field. Broader, more comprehensive moral research is needed to support the development of relevant and useful practice both on and offline.

Moral psychology in gang research and practice has the potential to serve a multitude of functions, but arguably the key ones can be summarised as: (a) to better inform moral debates and by proxy the outcome of such debates; (b) to inform our understanding of psychological constructs and processes within gangs so we can effectively address them in prevention and intervention work; (c) to help us integrate research and practice efforts in the field through more effective evaluations. It is untenable to separate moral discourse from criminality, which is inherently based on values, making the above points necessary steps in progressing gang research and practice in psychology and other disciplines. While interventions exist that tackle aspects of moral disengagement through moral education, victim empathy and other related constructs, it is difficult to imagine that they can be designed effectively without a deeper understanding of the very processes they are tackling. This makes the drive for research imperative for researchers and practitioners.

Given this, it is strange that, with the possible exception of exploring moral disengagement, little work has been done to accept Gibbs's invitation to build on the promising evidence cited in his 1993 chapter. Notably, morally informed programmes merit revisiting with more ambitious and rigorous research designs to establish their efficacy. Future trials of gang prevention and intervention programmes, even if not morally focused, could benefit from trying to assess the mechanisms by which programmes work, to help isolate those components that are effective, those requiring improvement, and whether individual components truly target what they are designed to address. For instance, has there been any benefit to GREAT II and GAGV considering moral disengagement? If not, why not? Evaluating practice can inform future research, just as research can feed back into effective practice.

One of the major challenges for moral psychology to overcome is the limited nature of cross-sectional measures, which may be addressed through longitudinal research design. For example, responses used to measure important constructs may differ from how participants would act in practice. Measures often cannot distinguish whether participants were morally disengaged prior to committing their offence, during their offence or only after. Nor can they distinguish whether gang members were morally disengaged before joining, or as a result of joining a gang. Longitudinal designs can help to address some of these questions, all of which may be crucial to informing how we best approach prevention and intervention. Until such a design is possible, a greater volume of evidence examining gang morality internationally would help to address many of the goals outlined previously.

Disentangling individual versus group moral processes would also be invaluable. For example, it would be interesting to explore whether Dyberg and Egan's finding

that those fitting the Eurogang definition of a street gang member were more likely to direct moral disengagement towards outgroups than delinquents who did not fit the definition is a reflection of the group's impact on an individual process, or whether those with a predisposition to DMDO gravitate towards gangs (2019). One study speculated that close-knit gang communities help to preserve moral disengagement, but that the process might be vulnerable if exposed to the cultural norms, values and behaviour of non-gang members (Boduszek, Dhingra, & Hirschfield, 2015). This could be useful for improving existing interventions, particularly group-based ones such as GRASP.

The two final recommendations of this chapter are unoriginal, but nonetheless highly important: a call for common, comparative language and a greater unity between research, practice and policy. As we seek to develop the role of moral psychology within gang research and practice, creating a more unified language and measurement systems will facilitate better comparative research and a greater cumulative research base, ultimately benefitting both professionals and those we work with. If policy makers wish to effectively address gangs, it is not enough just to review what works; one must work with researchers and practitioners to implement and continually assess what works in a changing landscape. Rather than funding research and intervention separately, policy-makers should encourage researchers and practitioners to work together in order to optimise funding and document work so practice can be informed by existing research and contribute its own findings to the discourse on how gang violence is effectively addressed. It is further recommended that funding providers are mindful of the importance not just of piloting, but of maintaining programmes.

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