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The Influence of Community Trauma and the Behaviors of Gang Members

Leshelle Franklin

The Influence of Community Trauma and the Behaviors of Gang Members

A DISSERTATION

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Leshelle Franklin

Montclair State University

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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Pearl Stewart

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

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of

Leshelle Franklin

Candidate for the Degree:

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Certified by:

████████████████

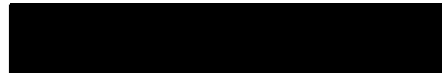Dr. Kenneth Sumner
Associate Provost for Academic Personnel,
Graduate School

_5/5/23_

Date

Dissertation Committee:

████████████████

Dr. Pearl Stewart
Dissertation Chair

████████████████

Brad Van Eeden-Moorefield

████████████████

Robert J. Reid

Abstract

Although there is an abundance of research done on gang members, gang activity, and gang activity in low-income neighborhoods, there is not much research that focuses on the community trauma in low-income neighborhoods; and any relations it may have on or to gang members. Research pertaining to gang members usually focuses on how gang activity affects the lives of non-gang members living in the community. This research study aims to explore community trauma and the behaviors of gang members, from a gang member's perspective. This research study gives insight into the minds of 10 male African American gang members, as they express their feelings, acknowledge their contribution to the trauma in their communities, and discuss their rationale for gang membership, through one-on-one interviews. Results indicate that although gang members are typically blamed for the trauma in their community, they (the gang members) themselves are frequently victims of their communal circumstances. Their behaviors may contribute to trauma in their communities, but their communities often inflict trauma into their lives.

Keywords: Gang member, community, trauma, behaviors, low-income.

Acknowledgements

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mother Michelle Franklin, who has always made me believe I can do anything. Her voice remains in the back of my mind, encouraging me to keep going, even when I wanted to give up. I would also like to dedicate this work to my husband Thierry Exilus, who continuously checked on my status during this process. Lastly, to my family and friends who continue to support me in everything I do, thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Context & Brief Literature Review

In urban communities across America, residents, including youth, are living in harsh environments. They have limited access to education, healthcare, supermarkets that sell products free from hydrogenated fats, artificial sweeteners, flavors, colors, and preservatives, clean parks, extra-curricular activities, and safer living environments. Research has shown how such environmental factors in urban communities can affect youth (Zyromski, 2007). As a person who works in these environments daily, I have spoken with community members/residents about their experiences. I have witnessed shootings, seen death, and have walked through the trenches of these urban communities. As a result of these experiences, I have realized that the ongoing and pervasive experiencing and witnessing of these events by community members has produced a degree of trauma that expands beyond individuals and encompasses the entire community. Further, I wondered how community-wide trauma influenced the lives and interactions of community members. I am particularly interested in gang members' experiences since gang activity has often been implicated as a primary cause of community-level trauma.

Historically trauma has been conceptualized as an individual rather than a group phenomenon. However, there has been some recent consensus about the importance of broadening "the definition of trauma from a singular event spawning core symptoms to a deeper psychological harm arising from a wide array of events and experiences that interact with development over time and exist in a cultural context" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Graves et al., 2010, as cited in Danzer et al., 2016, p. 352). If experienced by enough community members, such trauma can influence the development and norms of an entire community (Opara et al., 2020; Setoro, 2006). Community trauma can dramatically impact the day-to-day lifestyle

and well-being of an individual and has a significant psychological effect, which destroys an individual's dynamic ecosystem (Goldberg & O'Connor 2017). Community trauma has been linked to various factors, including an individual's fear of crime and violence (Kang & Swaroop, 2019). Living in a crime-stricken neighborhood can produce constant fear and uncertainty, leading to trauma (Kang & Swaroop, 2019). According to Goldberg and O'Connor (2017), community trauma can linger within an individual throughout their lifetime, affecting decisions and contributing to negative experiences within the community and traverse generations.

In today's society, where media coverage is pervasive, research has identified news reports about and exposure to incidents such as murders, kidnappings, and other violent crimes/acts, as second-hand victimization. It has linked victimization to negative psychological, behavioral, and emotional effects on children (Leiner, Peinado, Villanos, Lopez, Uribe, & Pathak, 2016). This is especially problematic if those children cannot access counseling or other resources to help them cope. Over time, several sources have noted the influence of criminal activity in low-income communities of color and the level of exposure experienced by children and adolescents. (Berman et al., 1996; Okundaye, 2004; Sams & Truscott, (2004) Stevenson (1997) reported that the leading cause of death among African American males ages 15 to 44 is homicide. Additionally, 33% of black men are on parole, probation, or incarcerated (Stevenson, 1997). Stevenson's (1997) research stated that out of 1,035 participants, 75% of males and 10% of females, ages 10-19, witnessed a shooting, stabbing, murder, or robbery of someone close to them. Sams & Truscott (2004) found similar results concerning witnessing violent events. The children who witness these events later become adolescents who join gangs and may participate in or become victims of similar incidents (Cudmore, Cuevas, & Sabina, 2015; Deutsch et al., 2012; Sams & Truscott, 2004; Wu & Pyoong, 2013).

Problem Statement & Research Questions

Though community-level trauma has been linked to various causes, gang members are often blamed for most trauma-related incidents in urban communities (Wu & Pyrooz, 2016). The social reputation of gangs, which is constantly portrayed negatively in the media, depicts gang members as criminals who induce violence and fear into their communities (Fernandes, 2013). Being a gang member is linked to increases in aggression, delinquency, poor conflict resolution, and decreases in empathy (Wu & Pyrooz, 2016). Researchers have highlighted the negative behaviors of gang members, which reinforces stereotypes and labeling placed on gang members (Fernandes, 2013). However, the history of individual gang members, their struggles, and the dilemmas that led them to join a gang is usually hidden (Fernandes, 2013). In fact, according to Wu & Pyrooz (2016), gang members are more likely to be violently victimized than non-gang members. This victimization makes gang members subject to their share of trauma while simultaneously inflicting trauma on their communities.

Adolescent membership in gangs continues to rise (Behrman, 2015), as does participation in criminal/violent activity (Wu & Pyrooz, 2016). In many cases, gang membership within the community may be the norm and, like community trauma, intergenerational (Augustyn et al., 2017). Though gang membership provides some social and instrumental benefits (Patton et al., 2016), admission to the gang may require the commission of violence against another or the acceptance of violence against oneself (Smith & Patton, 2016). These violent acts are trauma-inducing for the individuals committing the acts, those against whom the acts are committed, those witnessing the acts, and the community in general (Jennings-Bey et al., 2015; Perering, 2016).

Issues related to gang members are rarely studied outside of the connections to law enforcement. It is time to bring awareness to community trauma related to gang members' behaviors and fight for change. This need leads me to the following research question: How do Black, male, gang members experience and or participate in Community Trauma?

Purpose of Study

This study aims to explore community trauma through the eyes of the individuals who live and experience it; but who are the same individuals that researchers and scholars have referenced as being part of the cause of community trauma. Specifically, this study will examine gang members' experiences related to community trauma in their neighborhoods.

Significance of Study

Research on trauma in urban communities notes similarities within Chicago, Newark, Camden, Detroit, and Trenton. These urban communities are spread across the map geographically yet have members in their community who display similar behaviors and face similar obstacles/circumstances (Mullings, 1987). These communities embody many of the characteristics of a traumatized community. For example, these communities are marked by the historic and ongoing acts of racism, poverty, oppression, and unequal power dynamics that ultimately result in structural and interpersonal violence, forced displacement, lack of stability in services and investment, isolation, and high levels of stress (Falkenburger et al., 2018).

In today's society, where media coverage is pervasive, research has named news reports and other images such as murders, kidnappings, and other violent crimes/acts, as second-hand victimization. It has linked victimization to negative psychological, behavioral, and emotional effects on children (Leiner, Peinado, Villanos, Lopez, Uribe, & Pathak, 2016). Rawles (2010) states that the neglect of urban communities over multiple generations has resulted in community

and domestic violence often witnessed by children. These experiences often happen before a child is psychologically developed, making it difficult to process and cope. With the negative portrayals in the media, urban communities are often seen as dangerous. This historical stigma creates issues in today's urban communities, such as racial profiling and homicide victimization within the urban community (William-White 2013). This contributes to mistrust between the community and the men and women hired to protect it and intentional rebellion in youth groups (William-White 2013). If this is the case, imagine how powerful the effects of second-hand victimization can be for youth residing in urban areas. Youth who not only see clips on the news and social media but witness real-life events as they walk through their neighborhoods. This study is significant as it explores how community trauma, or second-hand victimization, affects black men living in an urban area, who are also gang members.

There are numerous studies on gangs, few studies on community trauma, and virtually none that view the phenomena through the eyes of gang members. This study will add to the field of research regarding community trauma and gang members' influence while examining urban communities' intergenerational historic traumatic experiences. The possible effects of community trauma told through the stories of gang members who live, and experience traumatic events opens the doors for culturally responsive interventions, programs, and strategies that not only work for the individuals that researchers label as "victims" of community trauma but possibly for the individuals that researchers label as the "perpetrators" of community trauma as well.

Chapter Organization

Chapter Two of this dissertation begins with reviewing literature related to several components that describe the injustices and traumatic experiences of individuals living in urban

communities. It discusses the history of gangs, touches upon issues with law enforcement, and provides the reader with information regarding how influences in urban communities can lead to community trauma. Chapter Two also discusses the theoretical concepts that support and frame this study. In Chapter Three, the methodology used to guide this study is discussed, giving the reader insight into how the study will be conducted, the description of the subjects in the study, and a summary of the subjects' community background. Chapter Four will present the findings to the reader, discussing major themes that arise from the one-on-one interview discussions. Lastly, Chapter Five further examines the findings of Chapter Four, conclusions and suggestions for further research, and consideration for future research and professional practices.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This Literature Review will begin by defining trauma and its link to Community Trauma. The Literature Review will then discuss the development of issues in urban communities, which set the stage for community trauma. Discussions of these issues provide insight into the history of urban communities, risk factors involving violence and crime, and trauma and PTSD in youth. The history of gangs, gang members, and trauma associated with being in a gang will also be discussed. The literature review will conclude with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives which will guide this study.

Community Trauma: Definition, Development, and Consequences

Trauma is defined as an event that once experienced or witnessed, can be physically or emotionally harmful to an individual (Opara et al. 2020). This event or series of events can have lasting adverse implications for an individual's mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, and social well-being (Opara et al., 2020). Trauma can be impactful, extending beyond the individual directly affected by an event, spreading into the community, and influencing the community's norms and behaviors (Opara et al., 2020, Sotero, 2006). Traumatic experiences can hinder the fulfillment of an individual's basic needs, and seeking such fulfillment can result in violence, drug use, disorganized social networks, organized crime, and other criminal acts that impact the community (Opara et al., 2020). Unemployment, lack of educational commitment by adolescents and young adults, vacant lots, and abandoned buildings, overcrowding of neighborhoods, and unstable homes continue to be present in urban communities (Rawles, 2010). These conditions contribute to the trauma in urban communities and have increased exposure to sexual assault, domestic violence, shootings, homicides, youth violence, and child maltreatment (Rawles, 2010).

The constant exposure to these traumatic situations causes low-income urban communities to experience what is known as "mass trauma" daily (Range et al., 2018).

Typically, the phenomena known as mass traumas occur due to events such as natural disasters, civil and political wars, and terrorism (Range et al., 2018). However, the violence, racial inequalities, and disparities in urban communities daily have become so pervasive that they are recognized as mass traumas. The rich history of oppression, discrimination, and daily traumas that lead to grief and loss becomes a part of a traumatic lived experience for the individuals who reside there (Range et al., 2018). For this study, community trauma will be defined as mass trauma. Its frequent occurrence and disruptiveness of the "norm" extend beyond an individual level to a community level (Range et al., 2018). This type of mass trauma disrupts the function of a community and creates instability, resulting in communal misbalance and loss of direction (Range et al., 2018).

A significant portion of community trauma stems from systematic social and cultural injustices, which become part of a particular community's history over time. Trauma in the community can produce undesirable outcomes that negatively impact an individual's function (Range et al., 2018). The experience of trauma in the community disrupts all developmental domains (mental, emotional, spiritual, biological, and physical), causing an individual to question their beliefs about the world and themselves (Range et al., 2018). As a result, urban communities have developed the cultural, economic, political, and sociohistorical disheartening emotional and psychological contexts today (Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017).

This type of community trauma typically occurs in low-income urban neighborhoods, mostly populated by black and brown-skin individuals (Range et al., 2018). Depleted resources contribute to violence in urban communities, leading to community trauma's complexity (Range

et al., 2018). This trauma can occur in stages; 1) pre-trauma, which is the expectation of a traumatic event; 2) present trauma, which is the actual event; and 3) post-trauma, which are the experiences and consequences that take place after the traumatic event (Range et al., 2018). Without proper resources to deal with such trauma, future problems are probable. Feelings of safety and the ability to self-regulate on an individual level decrease, judgment becomes impaired, and communication ceases (Range et al., 2018). These individual-level issues occurring in large numbers amongst the community, over time, set the stage for community trauma.

Development of and Issues in Urban Communities

History

Trauma's far-reaching negative impacts on people's development, well-being, and health in urban communities can be traced through history. Understanding the historical development of urban communities is important to understanding the current state of these communities (Rawles, 2010). Historical events tend to leave an imprint on the lives of those affected (Rawles, 2010). Whether those imprints positively or negatively affect those involved, one may argue that history never stays completely in the past. Before World War II, urban communities thrived. They flourished in business as well as cultural and social opportunities (Rawles, 2010). During this time, urban communities were populated primarily by White, Non-Hispanics. When African Americans from rural Southern communities migrated to those urban communities, White Non-Hispanics prepared to leave. This set the stage for the geographical segregation of African Americans and Hispanics (Rawles, 2010). Over time urban communities were often denied economic equality, resources, and social justice due to discrimination and became increasingly exploited and denigrated (Rawles, 2010). Rawles, (2010) perfectly paints a picture by stating;

These urban areas in America have evolved into communities that were the least valued and

> often most exploited citizens of America dwell and where the denial of social justice; in
>
> particularly, economic inequality and inequality of opportunity are the norm. Such
>
> circumstances are a reflection of the social system of status, which continues to exist and
>
> is legitimatized by the formation of a system justifying beliefs. (Rawles, 2010, pg.1)

In the late nineteenth century, ethnicity became the basis of local residential segregation (Logan & Shin, 2016). The racial zoning ordinance of December 20, 1910, brought to life the legalization of residential and racial segregation (Fabricant, 2018). As new transit systems began to develop, commuting throughout different neighborhoods became a barrier for some, increasing segregation between the rich and the poor and the beginning of overcrowded urban communities (Logan & Shin, 2016). Segregation continued as white non-Hispanic fled these communities when blacks began to move in. Many white non-Hispanics refused to let their children attend the same school as children of color (Fabricant, 2018). Black community leaders fought against segregation and educational equality, even taking to the Supreme Court for the well-known case of Brown v. Board of Education (Fabricant, 2018). Still, white non-Hispanics found ways to legally remain segregated, while black communities' conditions of poverty, over-policing, and lack of resources continued to worsen (Fabricant, 2018).

Residential segregation was no accident. It was strategically planned and practiced by federal, state, and local governments to create racial domination by white Non-Hispanics (Fabricant, 2018; McGrew, 2018). The federal government and state laws/regulations made it legal to enforce and promote residential segregation, homelessness, generational poverty,

differences in the quality of education, difficulty in homeownership for blacks, and racial

discrepancies in household incomes, which all still occur today (McGrew, 2018).

Though efforts such as the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the passing of the

Housing Act of 1954 (Goldberg & O'Connor 2017) attempted to address these issues, urban

communities began to face hardships resulting in poverty, drugs, violence, and a rise in the

incarceration of black men. This resulted in many single-parent households, police violence,

intensified racist attacks, and grief (Goldberg & O'Connor 2017). Due to the constant emotional

and psychological abuse youth in urban areas face and the injustices and inequalities to which

African Americans are subjected daily, a 21st Century Civil Rights movement was formed. The

Black Lives Matter movement aims to increase awareness about systemic racism and promote

self-love and brother/sisterhood among People of Color (Hargons et al., 2017). For such a

movement to even be considered; for a group of individuals to find it even necessary to

intervene, to protect a group of people who are constantly and systematically targeted by other

races and cultures, both foreign and domestic, in the 21st century is unsettling. It speaks volumes

about the trauma and issues surrounding the psychological, mental, and physical safety of youth

residing in urban communities and the negative impact their environment has on their lives.

Fabricant (2018) described current conditions in Brown and Black urban areas, which

included negative police interactions, housing segregation, economic destruction, and violence

on several levels as components of mass trauma. After being deprived of social, educational, and

financial opportunities, the once flourishing urban communities deteriorated, which would have

helped these communities prosper. This helped set the stage for urban communities. Today, they

still lack educational, financial, and social opportunities. The poor conditions seen today in urban

communities were not created by the individuals residing in them but by the decades of

systematic policies designed to dismantle any sense of community and empowerment (Falkenburger et al., 2018).

Risk Factors for Violence and Crime in Urban Communities

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the risk factor is something that increases risk or susceptibility. For youth living in urban communities, risk factors are traits linked with violence caused by an individual (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). They are, however, not direct causes of youth violence. Several factors, such as individual, community, relationship, and societal factors, contribute to the risk of violence (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). Research has recognized factors that make people more vulnerable to victimization (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). The factors can be classified into several groups: individual factors, family factors, peer and social factors, and community risk factors. As it applies to the areas where people of color live, urbanization has played its part in increasing crime in society, making it a risk factor for violence and crime. Socio-economic development is directly linked to crime rates (Pinderhughes et al., 2015). Various risk factors such as poor development of communities, delinquency, inadequate resources, and parental involvement can influence violence and crime in urban communities. These various types of risk factors combine to influence outcomes for those exposed to them.

Crime can be described as activities that deviate from the set laws. When a society's crime rates are high, the development of that society, the economy, and the overall well-being of the citizens are affected (Harding, 2009). Therefore, to solve the problem, one must look at the leading cause of increased crime rates in the community and find ways to solve the problem. The route of crime is strongly connected to urban communities' disadvantages and ecological structures (Hipp & Wickes, 2017). Crime increases as the neighborhood's ability to maintain social control of its community fails (Hipp & Wickes, 2017). The lack of social control stems

from poverty, racial concentration, negative influences on surrounding neighborhoods, and the lack of resources to help the community flourish (Hipp & Wickes, 2017).

People who live in communities with few, if any, resources frequently engage in violence due to their living conditions (Silver & Nedelec, 2019). These conditions include inadequate housing, disrupted families, and distressed neighborhoods (Silver & Nedelec, 2019). Inadequate resources in these communities impede young people from success in a capitalistic society (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). These living conditions are viewed as social structural consequences of poverty as individuals use crime to supplement their jobs and increase their income (Silver & Nedelec, 2019).

Research by Cambridge University shows that children from low-income families are two and a half times more likely to fall into crime than those from wealthy families (Silver & Nedelec, 2019). The correlation between poverty and crime is positively related, given the high rate of crimes recorded in urban communities (Silver & Nedelec, 2019). Poverty can push some poor people towards criminal tendencies, as they often have a harder time finding jobs that pay higher than the minimum wage and are often discriminated against (Rosen & Kassab, 2019).

While all crime is significant to the discussion of Community Trauma, one form of crime and a risk factor that is particularly relevant to this study is delinquency. Though delinquency is defined as a minor crime usually committed by young people (Rosen & Kassab, 2019), such behavior can be a precursor to more serious behavior. Although anyone can engage in delinquent behavior, delinquency is often perpetrated by young people living in poverty or low-income communities, with fewer resources such as jobs, education, and medical services (Silver & Nedelec, 2019). Scholars report that young people's delinquency and negative emotionality depend on gender and race; and can be applied to social context to understand the relationship

between teenagers' and adolescents' victimization and delinquency (Cudmore, Cuevas & Sabina, 2015; Yun, Kim & Morris, 2014).

Rapid development and growing economies lead to an increase in the cost of living. People living in poverty will continue due to racial inequality in salaries and skyrocketing rent (Silver & Nedelec, 2019). Minimum resources, inequality in society, broken families, lack of education, and other resources contribute to delinquency. Lack of resources creates an ongoing cycle of poverty, increasing crime in urban communities (Silver & Nedelec, 2019).

According to Deutsch et al. (2012), adolescents in low-income, urban neighborhoods with higher crime reports are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Low-income neighborhoods usually lead adolescents down the path of illegal ways of making an income. Although crime is prevalent in all types of neighborhoods, crimes committed in urban neighborhoods augment the neighborhood's social identity (Harding, 2009). In "high-risk" (Deutsch et al., 2012) neighborhoods, adolescents are more likely to resort to deviant behavior. This may be due to the lack of jobs, educational opportunities, and lack of supervision in the homes (Harding, 2009).

Another factor that seems to correlate with crime rates and adolescents is the parents' involvement. Family risk factors include low-income family functioning, low emotional attachment to parents, and family criminality, in which violence is derived from their family frustrations and traditions. According to May et al. (2002), an adolescent who has a close relationship with a parent appears to have greater emotional well-being. This decreases a child's likelihood of participating in risky behaviors. The more involved in a child's parent's life, the less likely the child will participate in delinquent activities (May et al., 2002).

Parent involvement is needed because it is essential to the growth of the child. Adolescents learn vital ethical life lessons from their parents that will help determine if they will grow up to be positive or negative contributing members of society, when parents are absent from their child(ren) 's lives, regardless of the reason, the chance of that child making poor decisions and living a life of delinquency increases. Parent involvement suggests monitoring and control, which also reduces delinquency (May et al., 2002). If the parents control what their child is doing, they will have a better chance of controlling their behavior. Generally, studies find that higher levels of parental control are associated with lower levels of delinquent behavior (Deutsch et al., 2012).

Effect of Peer Pressure

Another variable that plays a role in an adolescent's involvement in committing a crime is peer pressure. Peer pressure may be defined as the influence of one's peers in promoting engagement in an activity (Harding, 2009). Peers in many local neighborhoods influence adolescents to do things that may lead to crime. According to Harding (2009), as youth enter adolescence, the focus of their social world shifts from family to peers.

Social and peer risk factors may include rejection and gang involvement (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). A person may become more violent if their friend rejects them. Other people may become violent if involved in gangs formed by their peers and may feel the need to impress them (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). These peers are usually older and have no type of employment or source of income, resulting in illegal activity as a way to make ends meet (Harding, 2009). Harding (2009) resonates with Deutsch et al. (2012), who stated that an adolescent's association with mischievous peers serves as a consistent predictor for delinquent behavior, making peer pressure one of the leading factors that cause adolescents to commit crimes.

Harding (2009) further states that 75% of the respondents reported that older men outside their families were a part of their "peer network" and looked to them for guidance. The insights received from these peers are not always positive and sometimes lead them to violence. Harding (2009) states that regardless of how youth perceive these peer-to-peer interactions, it reinforces the legitimacy of - local frameworks, contributing to violence and other domains.

Trauma/PTSD in Urban Youth

There is evidence that trauma, both individual and community, has begun to manifest as PTSD in urban youth. While stress is an important part of maintaining and sharpening equilibrium between interdependent elements, excessive amounts of stress can lead to affective disorders such as PSTD (Ruchkin et al., 2007). Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), a disorder with which veterans returning from war are frequently diagnosed, is commonly found in African American and Latino youth residing in high-crime, low-income areas (Zyromski, 2007). PTSD in urban youth is usually caused by exposure to traumatic stressors such as homicides and violence (Okundaye, 2004). Urban youth are four times more likely than any other group to experience, witness, or become a victim of a violent crime (Ozer et al., 2004). Urban youth's constant exposure to community trauma manifests as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, allowing the victims to become perpetrators of violence themselves (Ozer et al., 2004).

Exposure to violence and crime has become extremely high among urban communities (Berman et al., 1996). Bystander shootings tripled in the 1980s while homicide rates doubled, and the numbers continue to rise today (Berman et al., 1996). As previously mentioned, an event, experienced or witnessed, can be emotionally harmful and traumatic to an individual (Opara et al., 2020). Witnessing shootings is not only traumatic but adds vulnerability to community violence and put adolescents at risk for developing aggressive and violent behavior (Sams &

Truscott, 2004). According to Sams and Truscott (2004), approximately 70–80% of urban adolescents witnessed a shooting, beating of another person, stabbing, theft, and homicide. Witnessing these traumatic events that take place at such a high frequency in urban communities can lower an adolescent's ability to feel empathy for others; thus, making it more likely that adolescents will partake in violent acts themselves with little to no remorse (Sams & Truscott, 2004). According to William-White (2013), as of 2008, blacks make up less than 15% of the population but contribute to a significant number of crimes, with adolescent homicide rates on the rise. Therefore, it is safe to say that traumatic experiences are likely to spread throughout the community, influencing other acts of violence and contributing to community trauma (Opara et al., 2020)

Being *confined* to living in urban communities due to residential segregation, unfair educational systems, racism, discrimination, poverty, and high unemployment rates increase the inclination toward crime and violence in urban communities (Smith & Patton, 2016). Levels of homicide in urban communities remain high, creating a positive correlation between violence exposure and psychological maladjustment (Ruchkin et al., 2007). The likelihood of a black youth losing someone close to them through homicide is 7.8 times more likely than their white peers, increasing their likelihood of PTSD (Smith & Patton, 2016). PTSD can lead to poor academic performance, drug and alcohol dependency, interpersonal relational issues, and disruptive behaviors typically displayed in urban youth. Urban youth who have PTSD due to community trauma were more likely to develop other psychiatric disorders than individuals diagnosed with PTSD without a history of community trauma (Ruchkin et al., 2007).

As community trauma rises due to the daily stressors of living in an urban community, the desire and belief that one can rise above the struggles of their environment decreases. When

crime rates and unemployment rates are high, combined with insufficient schooling, housing, and health care systems, urban youth begin to lose all hope. (Zyromski, 2007). Hopelessness increases the vulnerability of urban youth, heightening the likelihood of the youth becoming violent themselves. (Zyromski, 2007). Youth exposed to violence in the community, at home, and often at school were more likely to be involved in a shooting, stabbing, selling of drugs, murder, and physical assault the following year. (Okundaye, 2004). Their inability to cope with the severity of the consistent exposure to traumatic events may lead to feelings of anger, depression, and hopelessness, causing them to act out in violent ways as a coping mechanism to their overwhelming, stressful environment. This violence is often supported and carried out in the context of gang involvement.

Gangs

Definition of a Gang

Although gangs can be defined in different ways, for this study, gangs are defined as street-orientated youth groups that are usually involved in illegal activity and who typically spend time in public places/the streets rather than at school or home (Boden, 2019). The difference between the criminal behaviors of gang-affiliated youth and other youth is that gang-affiliated youth are usually more organized and have a continuity of history and presence over time. Most gangs have influential leaders, set rules, and identify symbols such as colors and hand signs. Gangs often associate themselves with specific geographical areas or types of crime (Rosen & Kassab, 2019).

History of Gangs

The history of gangs is long and complex. Dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, gangs have been known to cause violence (Rosen & Kassab, 2019). The Mohocks of Georgian

England was much feared during the 18th century; likewise, the Crisps and Bloods of Los

Angeles, California, were very dominant and feared in the 1990s (Rosen & Kassab, 2019).

Although gangs have become associated with violence and crimes such as murder and theft

(Rosen & Kassab, 2019), that was not always the case.

The American Revolution cannot be understood without mentioning Boston's violent

street gang activism, in which gangs were allied with patriotic leadership (Kang & Swaroop,

2019). The gangs mobilized votes, recruited future political leaders, helped their communities,

and encouraged the youth to expand their boundaries (Kang & Swaroop, 2019). Gangs played an

essential part in assisting their fellow gang members and community members by ensuring that

everyone became active, law-abiding members of society (Kang & Swaroop, 2019). The

proliferation of violence in many gangs was mainly due to the absence of positive role models

who held and helped define the boundaries for acceptable behavior (Kang & Swaroop, 2019). At

certain times, gang members made sure their communities were safe from graffiti, shootings, and

disputes; and volunteered at local churches and community events (Pattillo, 1998). Although

some may question gang members' intentions, there was still a strong sense of community and

peace within neighborhoods though the gangs may have conflicted with gangs from other

neighborhoods (Pattillo, 1998).

Today, the commitment of most individuals in gangs has shifted from their origin of

helping their communities. They have violent initiation rituals, such as getting together and

physically assaulting individuals willing to join (Smith & Patton, 2016), and emphasized

commitment to the gang. This became more apparent as the political, socio-cultural, and

ideologies in the United States began to shift. It became hard to find jobs, and the mentality of

the gang members shifted from community to "self" (Sudhir & Levitt, 2000). Drugs were being

pushed into urban communities, with gang members living as the primary sellers (Sudhir &

Levitt, 2000). Incarceration of minority youth began to occur on a large scale due to drug activity

and gang involvement. Acts of violence due to lack of trust, competition for resources, money,

territory, and the negative shift in urban communities' development contributed to the negative

connotation associated with gangs today (Sudhir & Levitt, 2000).

Gang Membership

The National Gang Intelligence Center reported that gang membership in the U.S.

increased by 40%, from 1 million to 1.4 million between 2009 and 2011 (Behrman, 2015). Since

2013, gang-related crime and membership have continued to rise, causing chaos in their

communities (Behrman, 2015). Youth between the ages of 12-24 have been identified as the

most active gang members living in urban communities (Patton et al., 2016). Their poor social

conditions may explain the connection of African American youth to involvement in gang

violence. As previously mentioned, the geographical segregation of African Americans and the

exploitation of their communities, followed by years of economic inequality and systematic

racism, negatively impacted the communities in which most African Americans reside. This led

to poverty, which damaged the social-cultural environment in many African American urban

communities, elevating violence, encouraging unhealthy behaviors, and decreasing a sense of

social efficacy and support (Pinderhughues et al., 2015).

In impoverished communities governed by high unemployment rates, youth are easily

affiliated with and often feel compelled to join gangs (Patton et al., 2016). Most gang members

live in urban communities that otherwise lack organization and have higher rates and

opportunities for criminal activity, strengthened by cultural transmission (da Silva, 2014).

Cultural transmission is a learned behavior or way of life. It may seem normal, similar to a "rite

of passage," as behaviors significantly influence a person through observations and participation. The violence and crimes associated with gangs in urban areas have become problematic for the community. As a result, police officers and lawmakers have made an effort to reduce incidents with crime control methods. Still, they have been unsuccessful due to the poor relationship and mistrust urban communities have developed with the police (Patton et al., 2016).

The make-up of the community, thus, has an impact on adolescents' behavior, making them more likely to join gangs and indulge in negative behaviors leading to organized crime (Braga & Clarke, 2014; Weisburd et al., 2014). Individuals typically join a gang during their adolescent years and continue throughout adulthood (Mallion & Wood, 2018). As a result, adolescents are exposed to violence and disruption, which increases the risk of being recruited into law-violating groups and gangs (Siegel & Welsh, 2018). The disintegration of the neighborhood is the main reason for delinquent behavior. Social control is almost impossible because of poverty, which eliminates the ability of the neighborhood to control its people, making joining a gang for a sense of community plausible (Siegel & Welsh, 2018).

Trauma Associated with Gangs

Youth describe gangs as a safe place that provides security and acknowledges, that place can be violent and create fear (Patton et al., 2016). Although gangs' fulfillment of reassurance, sense of belonging, and social and material advantages are viewed by youth as positive gains, gangs remain a prominent issue in urban communities (Patton et al., 2016). Gangs continue to recruit urban youth, inflicting violence on their community. Violence typically results in the loss of life or some form of trauma (Patton et al., 2016).

Due to violence and other local stressors, residents of urban communities, including gang members, are more prone to developing mental and health problems (Greif & Nii-Amoo Dodoo,

2015). Research indicates that urban youth issues work through micro- and macro-level processes, influencing health outcomes (Bastos et al., 2017). Micro-level processes are social, physiological, emotional, and cognitive factors, while macro-level processes are economic inequality, social deprivation, trauma, and defective healthcare systems (Bastos et al., 2017).

Gang members sometimes act on violence and other negative behaviors that affect non-gang-affiliated members of the community and gang members themselves. According to Petering (2016), gang involvement can amplify traumatic experiences, resulting in unhealthy ways for gang members to cope with trauma and stress. Furthermore, being closely connected to a gang member (i.e., family member, significant other, friend) can be just as much of a traumatic experience as personally identifying as a gang member (Perering, 2016). To cope with trauma and alleviate life stressors, gang members typically engage in negative behaviors such as the illegal use and abuse of drugs, partner violence, and unsafe sex practices (Perering, 2016).

Acts of violence and crimes associated with gangs contribute to the different levels of trauma for gang members and the community and create the vicious cycle of retaliatory violence, which leads to more grief, loss, and inadequately addressed trauma (Jennings-Bey et al., 2015). With a "tit-for-tat" mentality, in which an act of violence from one gang is followed by another act of violence from another gang, emotional and somatic behaviors and symptoms emerge and are expressed throughout the community (Jennings-Bey et al., 2015). When a gang-related assault or murder occurs in the community, the trauma affects several individuals in different ways in response to the assault or murder (Jennings-Bey et al., 2015). Neighbors, co-workers, friends, partners, or family members may experience grief, feelings of hopelessness, anger, and depression, whereas some gang members process their grief with acts of retaliation (Jennings-

Bey et al., 2015). These feelings and the variety of ways they are processed begin to shape the behaviors of individuals in the community and contribute to community trauma.

Social Theories Related to Community Trauma and Gang Violence

Social identities, experiences, and environments play a significant role in the behaviors of individuals; thus, when exploring why adolescents from poor communities who have experienced trauma engage in gang violence, it is crucial to look at the problem through the lens of social theories. There are a variety of frameworks that might be useful in investigating the research question. Still, social phenomenon theory and trauma theory seem particularly useful, as they each provide insight into youth violence. The overview of these theories aims at the influence of community trauma and the behaviors of gang members that may contribute to the trauma in their communities.

Social Phenomenon Theory About Gang Members

Social Phenomenon Theory focuses on the effect of social (external) factors on an individual's conduct. It relates to this study in particular as it examines the behavior which influences and is influenced by others. This theory holds that a social phenomenon is "constituted by the regular accompaniment of one organism's behavior by at least one other organism's behavior" (Wallace, 2017, p. 5). In other words, this phenomenon is not naturally created by the environment. Still, it is created by society, allowing the behaviors of others to influence and reshape one's perspective and directly inform one's opinions and behaviors. The violent actions of one person shape the choices, beliefs, and lifestyles of another person (Fraser, 2017). For example, if an individual is robbed in the street, they are likely to become more cautious in the future.

One of the theoretical frameworks explaining the actions of gang members and other criminal groups is the social phenomenon theory. Criminal groups have been a part of human social life for centuries. These groups presently pose a considerable threat to societies' development because of the availability and utilization of technology that enables these individuals to spread their beliefs and behavioral patterns (Storrod & Densley, 2016). In today's society, almost everyone uses technology, and gangs are no exception. Online social sites have millions of users, including gang members, creating challenges for law enforcement to do their jobs (Brannon, 2006).

Studies have found that gangs use technology to recruit new members and coordinate crimes and gang-related activities (Brannon, 2006). Vulnerable populations are at a high risk of engaging in criminal activity due to this spread of ideas and gang culture (Tamatea, 2015). Gang members use social media sites such as Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter to post gang initiations, violence, and other crimes (Behrman, 2015). As a result of using social media as an outlet to broadcast themselves, gang members often 1. create fear and intimidation in their communities 2. encourage others to join the gang by choice or by intimidation, and 3. Taunt, and threaten rival gang members (Behrman, 2015).

As mentioned above, the culture of gangs is often promulgated with the help of social networks and other media, which makes many young people more vulnerable and susceptible to partake in and accept the culture of gangs (Fraser, 2017). In simple terms, certain actions of gang members entice other youth to adopt those patterns or to join the group. Young people are willing to change their conduct and lives to be a part of a bigger community or improve their status by becoming a part of the respected or feared group. The theory of social phenomenon is instrumental in explaining the background behind various criminal behaviors.

According to Van Hellemont and Densley (2018), gang members create beliefs that encourage others to change their conduct and join these groups. This mythmaking is one of the key elements of any gang's functioning and lifecycle. This assumption is consistent with the theoretical paradigm in question since the behavior of a person (the creation of myths) influences other people's lifestyles. Young people find certain characteristics of gang membership appealing and change their lives to accommodate these gang norms. Importantly, social phenomenon theory has been utilized to develop strategies to reintegrate former members of gangs into the community.

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory explores the vicious cycle that trauma sets in motion while taking a closer look at the victim's life, vulnerability to be abused, and inability to escape (Johnston, 2014). Goodman (2017) alludes that although the definition of trauma may vary, those definitions seem to have the following elements in common: (1) an identified event or series of events, that is (2) experienced by the individual as physically, or emotionally harmful, threatening, or overwhelming, and (3) has lasting and holistic effects on the individual's functioning. With that in mind, one can only imagine the psychological impact trauma has on one's ability to properly and fully function (Goodman, 2017).

Trauma theory is often known for focusing on the question "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you?" (Tseris, 2019). It expresses the importance of one's lived experiences and survivorship rather than de-contextualized societal and psychiatric labels (Tseris, 2019). In relation to gang members, this theory can further explore the traumatic experiences gang members often face and inflict on their communities; by exploring the "what happened to you?" concept, as it relates to lived traumatic events/experiences. Trauma theory

links the literature on substance abuse and exposure to violence during childhood to the social and economic processes that concentrate on urban decay and poverty in inner-city neighborhoods; which damages trust and social networks, as well as the ability to act for change (Goodman, 2017; Kang, & Swaroop, 2019). Communities with high rates of trauma have higher rates of poverty and poor infrastructure (Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017). This often leads to homelessness, poor overall well-being, decreased psychosocial functioning, and a decrease in the overall community's quality of life (Goodman, 2017).

Individuals who experience traumatic events, such as gang members, often seek relationships with others who expose others to traumatic events (Goodman, 2017). They also reenact those same traumatic experiences they previously face on others (Goodman, 2017). This phenomenon can shed light on gang membership and behaviors and how traumatic experiences continue to be shared on a communal level.

The trauma faced in urban communities creates a living state of fear, in which the individual's sense of safety is lost as this fear becomes the new "normal" in the community (Range et al., 2018). Frequent shootings and killings traumatize urban residents, leaving them feeling hopeless due to their grief, loss, and sense of injustice (Range et al., 2018). Community Trauma may occur due to a combination of current events and historical trauma, causing negative intergenerational effects (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). These effects may manifest in nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance, and somatic expressions (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). This creates a formula for an attack on the sense of self, development, or lack thereof for coping strategies, and resiliency (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Ultimately, trauma negatively influences the development and structure of urban communities, their families, and the individuals who reside there (Range et al., 2018).

In conclusion, it is necessary to note that the research on gang membership can be enhanced using social phenomenon theory and trauma theory. The framework provides the necessary tools to explain people's choices and create strategies to change certain individuals' conduct. The focus on the correlation between different people's or groups' behaviors sheds light on the formation and destruction of gangs and their influence through diverse channels.

Given this study's focus on Community Trauma and the influence of crime, violence, and gang participation in urban areas, the questions which will guide this study are:

Research Question 1: How does Community Trauma influence the lives of gang members living in an urban area?

Research Question 2: How do gang members perceive the influence of their behaviors on their community about community trauma?

Research Question 3: How do gang members perceive society/system's level of responsibility for their current living situation?

CHAPTER THREE: Research Design and Methods

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach that guided this study will be phenomenology. Phenomenology allows the researcher to use the interview responses given by the participants to interpret the meaning and importance of those collected experiences (Fuster, 2019). Phenomenology allows for the recollection of lived experiences, which may be difficult to access through other research methods, to be told/expressed through verbal discussion and body language (Fuster, 2019). By utilizing this method, the researcher was equipped with the information necessary to write/reflect on those lived experiences as told by the interviewees (Fuster, 2019).

Phenomenology theory allowed the researcher to take the views and the lived experiences of the participants and acquire a taste for bringing those lived experiences to a data-related context (Goulding, 2005). In this study, the dynamic connection between gang involvement and community trauma was examined. The social construct of one's life is completely intertwined with their own lived experiences and their meaning of those experiences (Goulding, 2005). Hence, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that participants have lived the experiences that are the basis of the study by ensuring they met all qualifications for the study, and therefore take the participant's responses as "facts" (Goulding, 2005). According to Goulding (2005), phenomenology theory is very useful when developing theories based on the answers to interview questions. By understanding the participants' narratives, identifying significant statements and keywords from those narratives, and creating meaning to those statements/keywords, the concept of phenomenology theory allowed the researcher to link their data to theory based on the reflections of theoretical literature (Goulding, 2005).

Although phenomenological studies often vary in sample size, a phenomenological-based study's recommended sample size is between 8-12 participants (Thompson, 2018). Once the researcher realized that the responses received from their participants reached saturation, the researcher then moved forward with the analysis of their interviews. This often occurs when the data relating to the participants' lived experiences reach saturation (Alase, 2017).

A phenomenological study must illustrate the phenomenon of a small group who have experienced the researcher's interest in the study through lived experiences (Alase, 2017). Although the participants' individual experiences are unique, they are still comparable; as their lived experiences as gang members represent a similar perspective (Cort & Cline, 2017). With these smaller sample sizes used in phenomenology, it is important to note that the research results offer transferability and not necessarily generalizability in their findings (Cort & Cline, 2017).

Brief Community Overview

This urban community is located in Northeastern New Jersey, near New York City. With approximately 281,764 residents and over 24 square miles of land between its borders, this urban community is one of the most populated cities in the State of New Jersey (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2017). Children in this urban community are particularly impacted by the systemic violence and poverty in their communities. Of the 68,415 children in this urban community, 39 percent live in households with income below the poverty level (compared to 24 percent statewide and 25.8 percent nationally; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Educational outcomes for individuals raised in this urban community are significantly reduced, as evidenced by the reported 26 percent of individuals ages 25 years and older who are not high school graduates, compared to 11 percent statewide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The overall crime rate in this

urban community is over 78 percent higher than the New Jersey average and 12 percent higher than the national average (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2016). The high rates of crime and gang-related gun violence remain predominant community safety issues in this urban community.

Recently, significant efforts have been taken to revitalize and redevelop this urban community. However, amongst the five wards in this urban community (Central, North, South, East, and West), improvements and developmental initiatives are mainly seen in the business districts, located primarily in the Central and North Wards. Yet, many residential neighborhoods, located in the remaining Wards, continue to experience high crime rates, abandoned properties, and vacant storefronts.

Researcher's Positionality

Since 2016, the researcher has worked in the West ward of this urban community and began working in the South Ward in 2018. During those years of employment, the researcher has interacted with many residents of this community, including gang members. The researcher has developed working relationships with adult and youth-serving organizations, attended events that promote peace, and interacted with city representatives and officials, including the Mayor of the city and the councilmen of both the West and South Wards.

Establishing trust and credibility is extremely important in any relationship and is particularly important in research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher has established trust and credibility with a third-party organization located in Essex County, NJ, to get full cooperation from the subjects in her study. The researcher acknowledges that although she works in this urban community and is of the same race and ethnicity as her participants, she is not an expert, nor does she have insider knowledge of the reality of living in an urban

community or gang membership. The researcher did not grow up in an urban community, cannot relate to some of the experiences her participants may have had, and acknowledges social, educational, and economic privileges she may have that her participants may not.

A. Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 10 males who identified as African American, drawn from the South, West, and Central parts of the city located in Essex County, NJ. The men ranged in age, with the youngest being 18 years old, and the oldest being 25 years old. All participants have spent time in jail and/or prison, ranging from 1-6 years for one or more of the following: robbery, possession of a weapon, possession of drugs with intent to distribute, and violation of parole. All participants have also been injured (shot and/or stabbed) in a gang related incident.

This study focused on males only, as females make up less than 30% of gang members (Sutton, 2017). Additionally, 75% of female gang members leave due to parenthood and cannot frequently interact with their perspective gang, thus ending their membership (Sutton, 2017).   To participate in the study, the participants met the following requirements: 1) African American male raised in and currently living in an urban community located in Essex County; 2) between the ages of 18 and 30; 3) fluent in the English language, but not necessarily have to have English as their native language; 4) must be presently or previously associated with a gang, with their gang involvement lasting four or more years.

It is important to note that the researcher set the minimum requirement of gang involvement at four years, as the researcher believed gang members who had less than four years of gang involvement may not have as much experience. Since the research study focused on community trauma and the behaviors of gang members, the researcher saw it fit to seek out gang

members who had a few years of experience, in hopes of obtaining more information and better insight into community trauma from a gang member's perspective.

Participants were recruited through a renowned organization located in Essex County that deals with gang/violence intervention. All participants had been referred to this organization during the last five years for violence intervention purposes. These interventions typically take place in 1) hospitals after a victim has been shot or stabbed; 2) in Essex County urban communities after shootings or possible warnings of shooting occur; 3) once known gang members or affiliates are released from jail; 4) when disputes between rivals occur in an attempt to mediate/find solutions to prevent retaliation or violence. The researcher connected with the organization's supervisor, giving the supervisor the researcher's requirements to participate in the study. Those who interacted with the organization's intervention program and met the researcher's requirements were asked if they would like to participate in the study. Once an interest is expressed, participants were referred to the researcher to complete their prescreening form (Appendix B) and were then given a date to attend their one-on-one interview session.

Data Collection

Note: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher and all participants wore a face mask covering their mouth and nose. The researcher and participants also sat at least six feet apart during the entire interview process. The researcher ensured to follow MSU's IRB COVID-19 safety protocols while conducting the in-person interviews. These protocols included informing all participants in the study that spending time in an indoor space within proximity of the researcher, poses an additional risk of becoming infected with COVID-19. To minimize those risks, the following precautions were followed: 1) frequent hand washing, 2) wearing a face covering, 3) always maintaining social distance and 4) disinfecting the workspace/interview area.

The researcher conducted one on one interviews which lasted 45-60 minutes. The study of gang membership and their lifestyles and individuals' behavioral patterns and choices requires researchers to employ various methods. Quantitative research methods enable scholars to identify trends, while qualitative instruments are essential for attaining insights into the issue (Bachman, Schutt & Plass, 2015). Moreover, when exploring people's attitudes and behaviors, qualitative tools are preferable. Interviews can provide investigators with data that will help explain some types of conduct or beliefs (Padgett, 2016). Individual interviews can be the most appropriate or sometimes the only method when dealing with gang members.

As mentioned above, interviews are seen as a useful research tool. This strategy is also instrumental in focusing on the attitudes of knowledgeable people and hard-to-reach populations (Pawelz, 2018). Involving gang members in a survey in a real-life setting is impossible, whereas interviews in such an environment are an attainable goal. The researcher can build rapport, encourage the interviewee to share their views openly and fully and utilize proper methods to ensure the reliability and validity of the data obtained during interviews.

On balance, it is necessary to stress that interviews are the most appropriate research method when exploring gang members' attitudes and conduct. This tool enables researchers to receive detailed accounts of people who display certain behavioral patterns and reasons behind their choices. The analysis of this information is instrumental in identifying some topics to explore in more detail in further studies.

The researcher's interview protocol is guided by the literature surrounding community trauma, violence, and loss, and the possible detrimental effects on and by gang members. The researcher used the questions provided in Appendix A to guide the participants in one-on-one interviews. The researcher did not anticipate the need for follow-up interviews but informed the

participant that it is possible that the researcher may need to meet once more for further discussion/clarification on what was discussed during their interview. All interviews were audio recorded with the knowledge and consent of the participant and transcribed into text. The researcher also took notes on body language, tone changes, and other gestures that the audio may not capture to go along with her transcripts.

Safety and Confidentiality

To ensure the participants' comfort, a supervisor from the organization who was most familiar with the individuals was always present with the researcher. To ensure participants' anonymity, the researcher requested a waiver/documentation of consent. The researcher obtained participants' consent verbally and gave them a copy of the consent form, but did not require that they provide their name or signature. Participants were encouraged to use an alias when talking and were also encouraged to refrain from writing their names on the questionnaire regarding their demographics. Completed transcriptions along with demographic forms will be kept in files only accessible by a passcode (demographics will be scanned into the computer).

Furthermore, audio files will be deleted to avoid the voice identification of participants. All original forms, including handwritten notes, will be kept in a locked location. All documents will be kept for at least three years.

The researcher conducted one interview a day, to prevent the possibility of rival gang members encountering each other as they are leaving/coming for their interview. Since the research is centered around community trauma and the behaviors of gang members, there is a possibility that a participant might mention something deemed socially unacceptable during the interview. The researcher also made it clear to participants that nothing will be reported to the police unless it involves endangerment, maltreatment, or abuse of any kind to a child.

Additionally, all participants were offered free counseling sessions if they needed to debrief due to the sensitive topics that may affect them during the interview.

Data Analysis

The concept of phenomenology guided the analysis of data for this study. The researcher procured narratives from gang members currently living in this urban community, describing their experiences as natives in their community. All interviews took approximately four months to complete and were transcribed into text. The researcher utilized a three-step coding process, (a) conducted open coding, in which initial codes were assigned to quotes/responses from the participants; (b) axial coding, in which the open codes were analyzed to help in the development of constructing related categories/ideas; and (c) selective coding, in which axial codes helped in aiding the development of the theory (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Once transcribed into text, it (the transcriptions) was uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative software. ATLAS.ti data analysis process helped the researcher to annotate and code text without bias. The researcher then proceeded through the coding process, beginning with open coding, reading through each transcript for emerging themes and patterns. Once the researcher was finished with open coding, the researcher reflected on possible meanings and interpretations of the open codes through axial coding. The researcher removed all unique ideas to further analyze the results from axial coding, creating categories and strong themes present throughout all transcripts. Finally, with the guidance of the theories mentioned in Chapter Two, the researcher categorized major themes by the concept.

CHAPTER FOUR: Findings

Introduction

The main purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the connection between how personal trauma and community trauma in the lives of black, male gang members. Trauma is generally defined as an emotional response to a series of events, events, or situations that are life-threatening and have long-lasting negative effects. If experienced consistently by enough community members, such trauma can influence the development and norms of an entire community and play a part in the community's or individuals 'emotional, social, mental, and physical well-being.

In this chapter, the researcher discusses key themes and subthemes which address the following research questions:

RQ1: How does community trauma influence the lives of gang members living in urban areas?

RQ2: How do gang members perceive society/system level of responsibility for their current living situation?

RQ3: How do gang members perceive the influence of their behaviors on their community about community trauma?

The analysis of the interviews conducted revealed five major themes and several subthemes that correspond with the research questions and provided possible answers. The major themes were 1) Untreated trauma influences behaviors that contribute to community trauma. 2) Inherited gang activity, 3) Gang is my family 4) Barriers and expectations of gang members, and

5) Moral compass despite immoral behavior. The participants shared their experiences about their gang membership and their journey into joining the gang groups. Quotes from the participants depict the various sub-themes discussed.

RQ1: How does community trauma influence the lives of gang members living in urban areas?

The first research question was aimed at examining how community trauma influenced the lives of gang members living in urban areas. There were five themes and related subthemes which directly addressed the above research question. The themes were: untreated trauma influences behaviors that contribute to community trauma, inherited gang activity, how gangs can be like a family, barriers, and expectations of gang members, and having a moral compass despite immoral behavior. Below are the discussions of the five themes.

Theme 1. Untreated Trauma Influences Behaviors that Contribute to Community Trauma

In this section, the participants all discussed their lifestyles and upbringing. Although they grew up in different neighborhoods, had parents with different parenting styles, and had different childhood experiences, witnessing traumatic experiences at a young age shaped the men they would become. All participants pinpointed a pivotal moment in their lives that sparked a change in their behavior or attitude. The participants illustrated how the above factors contributed to both individual and community trauma. The subthemes identified by the researcher included: Hurt people hurt people, feeling abandoned, and tit for tat.

Hurt People Hurt People

Interviewing these gang members brought to light that although the participants lived in different parts of the urban area and perhaps never met each other, their life experiences were very similar. Many participants described exposure to violence and other traumatic experiences in their communities long before they joined their respective gangs. The death of a family member or a friend, and even being physically wounded, while having no subsequent professional support to address these traumatic experiences, changed how these participants viewed life. As a result, unknown to them at the time, something changed. One participant described his change in behavior after witnessing a shooting, but at that age, he had no idea that he, too, would one day become the shooter. This participant exemplified dissonance in that he acknowledged the pain he felt as a result of that death and how it affected him and yet he went on to inflict the same or similar pain on other people. He was traumatized by witnessing the shooting and death of someone he respected but went on to become a shooter who inflicted similar trauma on others without remorse.

> I seen someone killed right in front of me. I was like 10. On the playground. They just walked up to him and shot him and walked off like nothing happened. I was 10. After that, I shifted. I went from happy-go-lucky to grumpy all the time. He was one of the guys I looked up to." People looked up to him because he was like a symbol of unity in the group.

Another participant shared a different type of traumatic experience that forever changed his outlook on life, stating, "my mother died, and I really ain't have nobody, I was by myself. So, I just said f*** it". For many of these participants, having no opportunity or support for processing trauma at such a young age turned into anger and resentment towards their peers,

community, and, for some, even their parents. Some turned on their parents despite those parents doing their best in difficult circumstances. Those parents were viewed as being unwilling and/or unable to provide for them and their endless needs. After witnessing a shooting, one participant recalled his behavior shift and the beginning of the path to his gang affiliation. "I went from honor roll to not giving a f*** about grades. I started disrespecting my mom, my curfew, not really coming in, just not caring about consequences". All participants spoke confidently, felt justified for their behaviors, and clarified that this was their way of life. They firmly believed no one cared about them during difficult times, so why should they care about anyone else? Others talked about losing loved ones and how hard it was to watch the world move on as if nothing happened. One participant mentioned that if a classmate died, their school had "fake memorials," but no one ever followed up with the students who were closest to the deceased. Failure to check on the well-being of the participants when they lost a loved one was a common theme among all participants. These experiences and participants' reactions to these experiences are reflective of norms that may not enhance the well-being or encourage positive behavior within the community.

Feeling Abandoned

Among these participants, the feeling of abandonment was mentioned frequently. The feeling of abandonment in their time of need led several participants down the path to a gang-affiliated lifestyle. For several, these feelings were attached to specific situations or incidents such as the death of a parent, a loved one, or someone they looked up to. One participant explained how his friend's death changed him, making him more malleable and accepting of a gang lifestyle with little remorse for others. "I lost everything that night" he stated

downheartedly, as he explained the situation surrounding his friend's death. "I tried to get him to the hospital. I thought I made it. I ain't make it…I started shooting at any homie I see." Another participant mentioned how the death of his mother allowed other influences to enter his life. "My mother died, and nobody was there to make me do nothing. N*** was outside getting money and I had to fend for myself…so I had to go outside to get money too." Others spoke more broadly about feeling abandoned on a family, community, or societal level. With few or no positive influences and feelings of abandonment and resentfulness towards their community, many participants became fully involved in the gang lifestyle. Current gang members were filling the void the participants needed for family, money, and a sense of belonging. One participant in the gang stated, "I didn't have the male figure in the house… I looked up to the n***** that was giving me dollars every day. I wanted to be like him. The absence of parents, whether through family separation or over-commitment to work (multiple jobs to support the household) was prevalent and perceived as abandonment by these participants. Another participant had a similar story stating, "It's eight of us (referring to his siblings). My mom always had to work. She ain't have time to see what I was doing." He explained that his father was never around, and his mom was the sole provider; so, he, along with his siblings, took to the streets to help provide for themselves. Another participant added that poverty, in general, played a huge part in the violence in his community. His struggle growing up led him to the streets, eventually joining a gang, where he was satisfied with being able to provide for himself. "I was getting money at the end of the day, and nobody was starving.". This participant took on the role of provider at an early age, providing for himself and other family members including siblings.

At the time of data collection, several of these participants had taken less active roles in gang life and were working with violence prevention programs. When asked if they had thoughts on possibly breaking the gang cycle, participants discussed how difficult that can be, while addressing the issues of abandonment and the trauma that accompanied it. One participant provided words that reflected those feelings,

> I think black people should have like therapy and stuff like that, being that we go through a lot in our environment. We should have more therapy sessions or trauma sessions for kids to prevent them from growing up and turning into what they see.

Another added, "I try to do good now. I just mind my business, smoke my weed, and go to work…so if you want to start then alright, I hope you finish it cause if you can't I'll be able to." The participant went on to express that the violence in his community is a domino effect. Although one may want to change paths and do better for oneself, it can be challenging not to get wrapped up in the dramas within the community. "If you show a n**** how to react off love then they gonna love. If you show the how to react off hate and fear, then that's how they going to act…it's all passed down because we all hot headed, and nobody be thinking rational." Other participants touched upon taking a backseat in their gang lifestyle. However, they all hinted at the fact that they would have no issues protecting themselves or a loved one from harm, reverting back to the "street life," even if it's for a brief moment.

Tit for Tat

This sub-theme spoke to how untreated trauma influenced behaviors that contribute to community trauma. The untreated trauma most of the participants encountered during their childhood left them with emotional and psychological wounds they could not heal. These

traumas were part of a process that resulted in them inflicting trauma on others in their

community without remorse. They developed a "tit for tat" mentality, in which they have no

issue hurting someone they deem deserving.

> Like we know some of the stuff that happens is because of them (gang members) and I'm
>
> okay with that. Nobody wasn't worried about me, or worried about who was starting with
>
> me, or worried about who was doing stuff to me. So, the only thing I'm worried about is
>
> me, my homies, and my family. I'm not worried about nobody else family.

Several participants were shot in various retaliation-related incidents. When asked if they

feel the violence committed by gang members is justified, a participant replied.

> I feel as though it's justified, but like at the end of the day, if they do it, they would know,
>
> like you feel me, they be wrong… and I don't wish jail on nobody. But if it's the person
>
> I'm trying to get, I rather them go out by death, not jail.

One participant supported this thought by stating, "If someone does something to you,

you have to do something back to them. That is a rule. *That IS a rule*!" The words of these

participants speak to an overall community understanding and acceptance of the process. If you

behave in certain ways, you are subject to retaliation and deemed deserving of it. While inquiring

more about the tit-for-tat mentality that many gang members seem to have, territory infringement

was identified. One of the participants spoke of an incident where he was subject to this rule of

justified retaliation. "I'm from one place but I'm in some place I'm not supposed to be.

Someone saw me and I got shot". So, while he was certainly not pleased to have been shot, he

recognized that he was in violation of the rules that governed the community. Another

participant added, "It's kinda like a given when you're in that community. Like you going to be

with them. It's like being a product of your environment type s***". This participant speaks not only of gang members' acceptance of these behaviors but also about how their environment shapes their gang membership and the place of the gangs in the environment.

Generally, from the above discussions, untreated traumas which date back to early childhood tend to influence community trauma hence influencing gang membership. Traumatic experiences during childhood influence gang members' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors; the study has recognized that untreated traumas significantly influenced the tit-for-tat attitude (e.g., the offended people hurt others).

Theme 2. Inherited Gang Related Trauma

The participants in this study were aware that gang activity was pervasive and part of the history of their communities. They were also aware of how that gang history influenced their behavior and shaped the behavioral and social norms of the community.   These participants "inherited" that history as well as the untreated trauma that was a part of that history. The data indicates that they continue to act in accordance with that history even if they do not understand its origin.

As children, these participants were exposed to traumas experienced or created by their elders. For these participants, those elders were often elder gang members, living or dead, who served as role models. When asked about levels of violence or other negative activities in the community and the origins of those issues, one of the participants said "I put the blame on the older cats. They paved the way… How do you stop something that's already in motion?" Another participant shared these exact sentiments stating,

The old heads they was b**** that's why you can't blame it on the young people. Because none of the old heads have backbones… That's why everybody thinks they don't gotta listen to no rules. But n**** is wrong and that's why people be dying. Everything got consequences.

This participant seemed to be speaking about a lack of structure both in the community and the gang. He was not the only participant to speak about the existence of rules which govern behavior for gang and community members. One participant spoke about how breaking the rules almost got him killed. The participant went to the corner store, and as he was exiting the store, he was shot three times. "I'm from one place, but I'm in some place I'm not supposed to be. Somebody saw me and they shot me." Although the participant almost lost his life, he understood that he "broke the rules." When asked who made the rules up, the participant replied "It's just like, passed on. It's generational… They tell you like such and such stay up there don't go over there." The notion that their socio-cultural environment was pre-staged prior to their existence was strong across all participants. "We inherit beef…half the time the s*** don't have nothing to do with the people that's actually doing the crime. It's passed on." Another participant added, "these rules was here before you was born, before I was born." These statements indicate an understanding of territorial boundaries and an understanding of how the rules and traumas of gang life are passed generationally. So, the trauma experiences of multiple "old heads" set the rules of behavior for the generations of gang members who follow.

In addition, due to a lack of support and guidance from positive role models, gang members lack responsibility for their actions; they inherit gang-related violence from the older members, as current gang members are often taking the role of mentors. Furthermore, the

findings indicate that gang members typically engage in violence and dehumanizing acts to mediate their relationships between members and aggressive behaviors. Consequently, gang members can be understood to often lack responsibility for their behaviors because aggressive and violent tendencies influence the relationship between gang members, and those behaviors are seen as normal and/or desirable.

These participants clearly saw themselves as participants in an ongoing chain of events. Essentially, the findings are suggestive that lack of guidance and support from role models who were involved in positive activities and increased exposure to violence and crimes, such as the killing of a family member or associate by an enemy gang, helped persuade these participants to join gangs., inheriting related trauma with the promise to revenge. In the same perspective, it can be observed that aggressive, dehumanizing, and violent tendencies influenced gang members' relationships; as such, new members tend to inherit previous gang trauma and aggressive behaviors to remain relevant – violence and crime are an important part of gang membership.

Theme 3: The Gang Is My Family

Many participants viewed their gang affiliation as "sticking together as a family". Many gang members lived and worked together as a family. This was exemplified in the acceptance of gang members as family and family loyalty was identified as the primary reason why the participants joined gangs.

> I'm big on loyalty. Me and one of the fellas, we got into something I'm not one of them and he still rode with me so that kinda sealed the deal for me… I chose that route being as though loyalty is one of my big things, and he showed me that.

Regardless of the circumstances, the participants put themselves in risky and life-threatening situations, taking pride in their loyalty to their gang and the gang's loyalty to them. One participant recalled being shot when he ventured out of his territory and into another. "I got shot last November…and they went out, know what I'm saying, just off the strength of me… I got shot three times. Once in the hip, twice in the leg." The participant went on to explain that his gang "went out" on his behalf to avenge his shooting, although they understood he was in the wrong. They protect each other, whether right or wrong and seem very protective of their territory. It is possible that by creating this sense of community and family amongst gang members, rationalization provides the mental aid needed to remove full responsibility from self by viewing gang activity as simply protecting the family and nobly going after those who infiltrate the family's structure

Essentially, the findings indicate that while gang membership is accompanied by increased exposure to crime, violence, and the risk of incarceration, many still join gangs probably because gangs act as a surrogate family to them, especially among individuals who grew up with histories of abuse, poverty, having access to drugs and weapons, as well as the risk factors associated with the presence of gangs in the neighborhood. In addition, gang families offer individuals some sense of belonging, control, prestige, and power, especially among members who identified that these factors were absent in childhood.

In addition to establishing surrogate families made up of gang members, some of the participants reported joining gangs to which blood or marriage-related family members also belonged. Several participants had their blood relatives affiliated with a gang. One of the participants stated that "My gang is really my whole family. My father my sister, my brother, my

nephew, my cousin… we all one family*".* Another participant added proudly. "My father is my 'big bro.' I am under his set." This participant stated that his biological father was one of the top leaders in his gang, and he refers to his father as "big bro." When asked how does that dynamic work, the participant replied, "No favoritism, he treat me like the rest of them." The participant went on to explain that even when he is at home in a private setting with his father, he still addresses him as "big bro." The participant also added, that to join his father's gang, he was "jumped in." This initiation process involves several members who are already in the gang, to severely beating up the person wishing to join the gang, for a set amount of time. The time is usually set by a higher-ranking gang member and serves as a test to see how tough the individual wishing to join the gang is. This is perhaps an indication that ties to the gang and its rules may supersede those of the biological family.

Another participant had a unique family situation, which still alluded to the fact that family is important for gang members. This participant's biological father and stepfather belonged to two different gangs. "My father Crip. My Stepdad Blood. He was so mad when he found out I was a Crip. He thought I was going to be a Blood." When asked how his father and stepfather, as well as himself, function outside the home, knowing their gang are rivals, the participant stated,

> At the end of the day, I'm still their family. I would not allow my people to do nothing to his people, and vice versa. Anybody that has anything to do with both parties has a mutual understanding…But if it's like cookouts and stuff like that going on…and I'm going to the ops side (opposite side), I just got to make a call like yo I'm coming up there so he will be expecting me. So won't be me getting shot for being in the wrong place.

It was clear that participants believed family, biological or not, sticks together, and for them, their gang is their family even if those relationships are complicated.

Accordingly, the findings indicate that the idea of gangs being perceived as a substitute for a family is mainly adopted because the majority joined due to the associated untreated trauma (felt socially or financially abandoned or had the desire to revenge). Consequently, the findings suggest that gangs provide members with a sense of protection and belonging, which they cannot receive from other relations in the community. In addition to the feeling of family, given that young gang members tend to lack critical thinking skills and maturity to understand the dangers and negative consequences of their behaviors fully, they inherit gang-related trauma without fully understanding the associated consequences. As opined by one of the participants "The old heads they was b**** that's why you can't blame it on the young people. "

RQ2: How do gang members perceive society/system level of responsibility for their current living situation?

This research question was succinctly by one theme and several sub-themes. The majority of the participants agreed that their actions inflict some trauma on the community but see societal issues as the cause for those actions.

Theme 4. Barriers and Expectations

There are systemic barriers that make it more difficult for minorities and urban communities to become successful. The participants in this study made it clear that they are no exception to the rule. Although they inflicted trauma on their communities through their actions, they unanimously agreed that the odds were stacked against them and any efforts they might

have made to take a different path. From an educational barrier standpoint, the questions

participants answered centered on their dreams and goals. All participants had big dreams when

they were younger, and some still had them. Real estate, going to school for political science,

becoming the mayor, and opening a business, were among the dreams articulated by the

participants. This triggered a follow-up question regarding school and obstacles that may have

prevented them from pursuing those dreams Almost all participants dreamed of "going to

school". Some wanted to simply attend and finish high school, while others had thoughts of

attending college. Unfortunately, their association with gangs and various circumstances made

those goals seem impossible. Education has been linked to success, but for many participants,

that key to success took much work due to barriers within their community. In most cities,

children can only attend schools within their residential zip code. One participant explained that

several of his friends' right to education was limited, not by choice, but by fear.

> A couple of my lil homies - they stopped going to school because they live in an area
>
> where the opposite side was the main population, so they stopped going to school. Many
>
> of us had to move because they knocked down half the projects… our original district
>
> school is East side and the ops is Westside. So now they have to go to Westside. So, they
>
> not going to school at all.

Moving is a normal part of many people's lives, but for so many young men in this urban

community located in Essex County, moving takes away your freedom to access education and

the mental capacity to feel safe. Many participants expressed how unsafe schools can be for gang

members or those related to gang members. They do not believe that the teachers and principals

are equipped to deal with gang rivalry in school and have realized that the safest thing to do is to

stay out of school. When asked if they feel that the only option is to drop out of school, a participant responded, "yea it be like that. Unless you wanna die. That's how it go unless you strapped (carrying a gun) all day." Carrying a gun, even if one was willing and desired to do so, is dangerous, virtually impossible given the presence of metal detectors in urban schools, and not conducive to learning.

The participants faced severe educational barriers, as well as traumatic experiences that forced them to stop going to school prematurely. One can only imagine the trouble and negative influences that can occur in a child's life when they have an entire day with nothing to do. It strips them away from the possibility of forming positive friendships in school, building their confidence when they get something right in class/completing a project, and/or having the opportunity to interact with their teachers, who could potentially serve as positive role models.

Poverty Is the Route to Evil

Participants also discussed how complex society makes it for them to get by. "The gangs have a lot to do with the violence, but it's also other things that contribute to it like poverty and stuff like that." Another participant added, "You know my mother had three kids to take care of, and I needed stuff for myself." As a result, he felt like he had to sell drugs to help make ends meet. The experience of living in impoverished communities and needing money was consistent among participants. When asked, why didn't they just get a job, these participants were clear about the urgent need for money to survive, and the amount of time it took to make money at a legitimate job those jobs less attractive to them. One participant explained, "That's all we want is jobs. We want money… Like why would I break my back for 8 hours when I can just stand out here and get a band ($1000) tonight? Why wait for two weeks?" While acknowledging selling

drugs is a quick means to an end, there was also the understanding that there was a price and a procedure for accomplishing this task. To sell drugs in a specific area, one must ask permission, become affiliated with a gang, or suffer the consequences.

> If somebody come out here and want to get money on my block (sell drugs) …but at the end of the day, he can't get money right here because he not f***ing with me. So that's starting and now I got to do something to him.

This unspoken rule has caused many individuals to join gangs to sell drugs safely and make money to feed themselves and their families.

"In order to sell drugs, I had to become affiliated." Another participant added, "A lot of people want change (money). I know a lot of people that ain't got no choice but to sell drugs. Nevertheless, if the community was a little different where we stopped showing the lil kids growing up that this s*** cool, then maybe they would be like damn well let me get a job instead of doing this and that. The participants overwhelmingly suggested that the messages they received from their community at a young age were not conducive to an anti-gang-affiliated atmosphere.

> "Watching people sell drugs all day and that's all you see 24/7, besides you being in school for your lil 8 hours, like your mind is always going to be there. It's never going to think about oh, I just want to do this or I want to dream, I want to be an astronaut. You ain't gonna think about that s***. You gonna look like damn, he got this car, he got all these shoes. I want that. So you gonna go that easy route."

Earning money by selling drugs seems to provide the financial stability many participants need. Their impoverished environment ironically motivates them to go out into the world and earn money by any means necessary. From untreated trauma related to a lack of resources and consistent exposure to violence to the glorification of nice cars and fancy things in urban culture to the lack of protection in schools, the "every man for himself" mentality appears to have shaped these young men.

Broadly, the findings suggest that in neighborhoods with higher levels of criminality, drugs, and violence, gang influence is rather difficult to control; on the contrary, gang membership is associated with access to protection and finances (incomes from criminality, such as selling drugs). For instance, from the assertions of how some of the members joined the gangs, it is evident that to access income, they had to maintain the functions of the gangs or at least adjust their social standings within the gangs. As such, living and functioning in gang neighborhoods implies that individuals will naturally fall into comfortable roles within the gangs, such as selling drugs; however, to become fully invested, one must also embrace the violent activities that come with the territory of gang membership.

RQ3: How do gang members perceive the influence of their behaviors on their community?

The final research question was answered by the following theme and several sub-themes. This research question aimed at addressing how gang members perceive the societal level of their current dangerous behavior.

Theme 5. Moral Compass Despite Dangerous Behavior

Despite the danger of their behaviors, the participants exhibited empathy and moral standards regarding women, children, the elderly, and their friends and family. Regardless of the things they have done and the things they are willing to do to protect themselves and those they deem family, there is a moral compass that guides them. This moral compass provided unwritten rules for some of the participants.

Women, Children, and the Innocent

For some participants, the moral compass focused on groups that were "off limits" for certain activities. One of the participants interviewed briefly discussed some of the things he did as a gang member. He disclosed that he had served time in jail, had been shot, and participated in selling drugs, armed robbery, and shootings. When asked to describe the worst thing he had ever done, the participant said, "Hitting a female". During an armed robbery, the participant tied up a man and his girlfriend pistol-whipped them both and shot the man in his back. The participant targeted the man because he had not asked for permission to sell drugs in their neighborhood, nor was the man affiliated with the participant's gang.

> I hit a girl. Like I don't normally do no girls, no women, no children. I don't feel bad for anything I did. Anything I did to anybody was because they deserved it… but when I harm a female and things like that…. cause I got sisters, I don't like that. That's the only thing that I think I could have done different.

The participant had no sympathy for the man he shot, nor did he regret shooting the man. He was, however, bothered by hitting a female, as it interfered with his moral compass. Another participant's thoughts also aligned with keeping women and children off limits. He stated, "people that are innocent or people that don't got nothing to do with nothing or kids, we don't do

that. That's corny." This participant who would not hurt a person he deemed innocent or a child but had recently been released after a six-year sentence. He was charged with armed carjacking and kidnapping. He expressed that some crimes may appear unprovoked when reported to the world, but he had no regrets about targeting his victim. Further discussing his carjacking and kidnapping case, he stated,

> He (the victim) probably was innocent to y'all, but I was in a community program because I was arrested before that. He (the victim) was racist, and he was in the way, and he deserved everything he got.

As demonstrated by both participants above, one participant assured himself that the consequences of his racist counselor's actions were deserving of carjacking him. In contrast, the other participant felt that tying up and shooting a man for selling drugs without his gang's permission was justice served. Unfortunately for another participant, his intent to harm someone he felt deserving went wrong. When asked to describe the worst thing he has ever done, the participant replied, "sending a call and they didn't get the right people." The participant mentioned that he retaliated and sent some of his fellow gang members to track and kill his rivals, for disrespecting him and showing up in places where they know they were not supposed to be. Somehow, communication and descriptions of the targets were misconstrued, and the wrong people were killed. The participant's voice softened, and his body language changed as he spoke about this incident. He expressed empathy as innocent lives were unintentionally taken. It was clear that it was not the taking of a life that was troublesome but the taking of what was understood as the wrong life.

Selective While Selling Drugs

Another interesting topic of discussion that a few participants brought to light as part of their version of a moral compass was selectivity regarding whom they were willing to sell drugs to. They would not sell drugs to or profit from those they loved, friends, or the loved ones of friends. Some even refused to sell drugs to the elderly or certain women. One participant firmly stated,

> I don't sell to no pregnant women…and I don't serve no family members. Like if I know you and know like that's your aunt or your uncle or your pops… I'm not serving you. Somebody else gonna have to do that… and I don't serve grandmas. I don't care who you are."

The use of the word "serving" is noteworthy in that it puts the selling of drugs in the realm of a business transaction with the sellers seeing themselves as businesspeople rather than as those who bring harm to their community. For some, the concern was not for the buyer but for the product. For example, one participant expressed his willingness to sell weed to anyone but is very skeptical about crack and cocaine; "weed that ain't nothing… but dope and coke I don't know. I don't know people that do that." It can be understood that the gang members felt a moral obligation to protect the health and well-being of those they deemed worthy of protection. However, when the researcher pointed out that the individuals, whom they refuse to service may go elsewhere to purchase drugs, one participant expressed that he was fine with that; "I don't know you so why should I give a f*** about you or your family? That's y'all business." Consequently, from the responses, it appears that those individuals either meant something to them personally or represented an image they felt they needed to protect from drugs, similar to the moral obligation they share, in preventing the harming of women and children.

The finding indicates that family and individual factors are among the influential domain in gang involvement and offending behaviors. Accordingly, from the assertions, despite aggressive and violent tendencies, gang members are perfectly aware of their ethical values. In some cases, it guides their behaviors to protect the greater good. Gang members are still committed to moral values, such as kindness, equity, and justice, which explains why they engage in selective drug selling or acts of kindness when encountering children, women, and the elderly. From the same perspective, the impact of their behaviors on the community can be measured and answered, even gang members have a duty and obligation to their families and the community.

Stay Dangerous or Die Safe!

One of the most exciting concepts to emerge from interviewing these participants was a participant's response to the interviewer's farewell (statement)greeting, "be safe." The participant responded by saying,

> Nobody safe. You have gotta stay dangerous. Being safe gets you killed. People do dangerous stuff to safe people. Innocent people right?... Just cause they out here trying to stay safe. Stay dangerous and ain't nobody gonna f*** with you.

Further probing of this statement led to an understanding that responsibility for actions and the results of those actions was complex, attached to situations that may not have directly included the participant, and based on the history of the community and the gang. This seemed to provide an understanding of the ways in which personal traumas could pave the way for community trauma.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

Introduction

Trauma is a stressful or troubling event that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope, leaving them feeling powerless, afraid, or out of control. It may be triggered by various circumstances, including physical or sexual abuse, natural catastrophes, accidents, or watching or experiencing violence. On the other hand, community trauma is the impact of traumatic experiences or occurrences on a community as a whole. Mass shootings, natural catastrophes, or community-wide violence may contribute to it. The consequences of communal trauma may be extensive, affecting peoples' social, emotional, and physical well-being. Through the qualitative methodology, this study explored the influence of community trauma in an urban community located in Essex County, NJ, and its impact on the behaviors of gang members. Participants were asked to reflect on their childhood, any traumatic occurrences that may have affected them growing up, their reasoning behind joining a gang, and possible trauma they may have caused in their communities. The three questions that guided this study were 1) How does Community Trauma influence the lives of gang members living in an urban area? 2) How do gang members perceive society/system's level of responsibility for their current living situation? 3) How do gang members perceive the influence of their behaviors on their community about community trauma? These questions were derived from the researcher's curiosity to learn more about how the behaviors of gang members may or may not have influenced community trauma.

Five themes and several subthemes were derived from the analysis of these data. Those four themes were 1) Untreated trauma influences behaviors that contribute to community trauma. 2) Inherited gang activity, 3) Gang is my family, 4) Barriers and expectations of gang members, and 4) Moral compass despite immoral behavior. This section will discuss this study's theoretical perspectives and findings as it relates to community trauma and the behaviors of gang members. Lastly, this section will discuss an overview of possible implications, limitations, and areas for future research, followed by the conclusion of this study.

Theoretical Perspectives

Social Phenomenon Theory and Trauma Theory were appropriate theoretical perspectives that tied this study together. Based on a qualitative approach, the researcher benefits from contextual richness through the participants' storytelling, something quantitative research cannot provide (Hosni, Li & Ahmad, 2020). The theories can be linked with four social lenses connecting the participants' cognitive scripts and lived experiences with the study's purpose. These lenses are 1) environmental lens – the effects that social and physical environments and surroundings have on one's life; 2) cultural and social lens – how daily issues affect relationships, beliefs, and an individual's daily life; 3) ethical lens – issues at a moral level; and 4) economic lens- how economic issues impact one's life (Belon et al., 2016; Garbarino et al., 2020). The study on trauma and community trauma found gang involvement related to risk factors, past traumatic experiences, and grief, which can be explained through the identified lenses. In the same context, the environmental factors are the neighborhoods in which gangs live; within the study context, the environments are characterized by gangs, criminality, violence, and drug use and abuse (Decker & Curry, 2017).

Social Phenomenon Theory Through Environmental and Economic Lenses

From a social phenomenon theory framework, it can be understood that all behaviors reveal the role of human awareness in social actions, social worlds, and social situations (Van Ngo et al., 2017). Accordingly, in line with gang membership and involvement, the theory supports that involvement in gang membership was stimulated by inherited trauma from previous generations. One of the most significant facets of social occurrences involves one individual's observable conduct inducing another. The central principle of the model of a social phenomenon is that it is shaped by society (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019). In the same perspective, Young et al. (2014) showed that gang involvement is correlated to experiencing multiple, prolonged, and severe personal challenges that gradually disintegrate the relationships within families, communities, and schools. People are drawn to join gangs and high-risk social cliques due to their ethnic identities, self-concepts, and sense of belonging (Van Ngo et al., 2017). Therefore, according to a social phenomenon theory, humans are aware of their social situations, worlds, and actions; the environment within which an individual dwells influences their social behaviors and actions, including gang membership, mainly because individuals join gangs to access some sense of family and sense of belonging.

It is important to reiterate that Social Phenomenon Theory focuses on external factors influencing an individual's behavior. From the environmental and economic lenses, the study suggests that the environment of the gang members had a significant impact on their social lives and decisions. Several individuals in the interviews described their life prior to joining gangs. They were surrounded by gang activity, drug use, criminality, and violence. Most participants reported witnessing shootings and killings of their loved ones and associates. In addition to the traumatic experiences encountered, it was also observed that their relationship with positive adult role models was inadequate, with a few participants having older siblings, parents, and other

relatives in gangs. Similarly, this is supported by Garbarino et al. (2020), who found that the lack of adequate support and guidance from positive role models amidst the increased exposure to violence and crimes often leads to gang involvement. Consequently, from a social phenomenon framework, it can be observed that individuals' environments played a crucial role in their decision to join gangs. Traumatic experiences can make people vulnerable to joining gangs, as they may be enticed by false promises or offers of support and belonging.

The behaviors of others in their community notably influenced these participants' perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors. They can arguably be the route to their gang involvement and contribution to the community trauma. This inference can be derived from the participants' description of how witnessing violence or losing someone to violence shifted them from the boys they once were to the men they have become (gangs). Similarly, it can be evidenced that with little to no support from positive role models, these young men turned to gangs (which offered them some sense of belonging and acted as surrogate families), providing them with the family they felt they needed and the false belief that "staying dangerous" keeps you safe (Roelofse et al., 2018; Frisby-Osman & Wood, 2021). Essentially, the individual expressed feeling alone growing up (feeling abandoned), and now that he is part of a gang, he feels a sense of belonging. Thus, his perspective on the harm he or other gang members may inflict upon his community is irrelevant. The discussion shows that environmental factors appeared to have skewed his view on social relationships, social worlds, and situations (Densley, 2018). For many participants, it is not as simple as black and white, as it includes different areas filled with shades of grey.

Additionally, economic factors played a role as participants acknowledged that one must become gang-affiliated to make money selling drugs. In agreement with the argument, Gunduz (2020) noted that the culture in the contemporary modern world is mesmerized with nice clothes,

fancy cars, and jewelry; nonetheless, several economic realities hinder individuals' capacity to

obtain those things. On the other hand, the study findings indicated that individuals joined gangs

to access money, implying that gang membership may seem like a more feasible option to access

money (De Vito, 2020). From the findings, some participants discussed economic hardships,

stating that their parent(s) were either struggling financially due to having multiple children in a

one-income household. Others discussed educational barriers, which they knew would hinder

their future goals, and thus gave up watching drug dealers having money, and some even being

paid by drug dealers at a young age piqued their interest in gangs. As a result, from a social

phenomenon theory, it can be understood that environmental factors play a crucial role in

motivating individuals to join gangs. Access to money further influences individuals' decisions to

become gang members.

Trauma Theory Through Socio-Cultural and Ethical Lenses

The cultural and social lenses dive a little deeper into how environmental factors can

further influence and impact the social customs and daily issues in an individual's life, beliefs,

and relationships. Concerning childhood experiences and how the encounters shaped their

decision to join gangs, it can be established that the feeling of abandonment encouraged the

attachment to gangs. According to Caruth (2016), trauma is an incident that interrupts

mindfulness and averts direct verbal demonstration; trauma involves irreversibly harming the

psyche. The model of trauma challenges cultural norms by exploring the limits of expression and

meaning. It also suggests that the experience of trauma is difficult to articulate or convey through

language, which social and ethical norms can influence. From a socio-cultural and ethical lens,

this could mean that trauma is often stigmatized or silenced in certain cultures or societies,

making it even harder for individuals to communicate their experiences and seek support.

Similarly, the model of trauma can also apply to the current study phenomenon, especially among the study participants. Essentially, there is a need to uplift the lives of the gang members and their respective families, which can be reciprocated by embracing trauma-conversant care principles. Accordingly, the major guiding philosophies in Trauma model care include choice, safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, and empowerment; safeguarding the emotional and physical safety of a person is addressed is the crucial step to offering trauma-conversant care (Caruth, 2016). Therefore, the model can be used to lessen situations of gang-related activities.

Looking at Trauma Theory through a socio-cultural lens, it can be better understood how lived experiences, whether physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, can be detrimental to forming an individual's identity. The theory focuses on lived experiences and survivorship, centered on "What happened to you?" (Caruth, 2016). Based on the study findings, the respondents in this study revealed how their lived experiences regarding how traumatic experiences motivated them to join gangs influenced their attitude towards gang activities and, therefore, their perception of community trauma (Caruth, 2016). For instance, in the current study, participants disclosed that gang activity in their neighborhoods had become routine. The majority recalled gang-related incidents during childhood and adolescence and how those incidents later influenced their involvement in gangs in adulthood. In agreement with the findings, Quinn et al. (2017) established that traumatic experiences, especially those that re-occur and are perceived as usual, tend to impact how individuals view themselves, their peers, and the community. Accordingly, as mentioned earlier in the study, the literature supports the findings indicating that participants showed no remorse for the trauma they may have inflicted upon their community because no one showed remorse or concern when they were hurting as adolescents. Such a perspective created a cultural belief in their community that violence as a

form of retaliation is acceptable and justifiable (Bailey et al., 2020). In addition, Kerig et al.

(2016) found that individuals who continually experience abuse, violence, or criminality, tend to

feel marginalized, ignored, or rejected, impacting their view and perception of the community –

being in gangs offers protection. Additionally, it can be understood that if someone does

something to you or someone you love, it is okay to do something to them in return; yet, from a

trauma theory standpoint, individuals' inability to escape the vicious cycle of community trauma

breeds more traumatic experiences in their environment. Thus, the cycle of trauma continues.

Moreover, From the social-cultural theory standpoint, De Vito (2020) analyzed that the

motivation for gang involvement was a lack of family consistency; as such, gangs replaced

family; gang members filled the void the participants needed for a sense of belonging, family,

and access to money. In agreement with the discussion, the study findings align well with the

previous literature; from the untreated trauma standpoint, it can be inferred that trauma is a

significant predictor that increases the risk and likelihood of becoming involved in violence and

gang activities. Therefore, it can be observed that gangs in the neighborhood and the increased

likelihood of encountering traumatic experiences inevitably contribute to community trauma; for

instance, those who have lost loved ones from gang-related violence are highly likely to become

gang members. Essentially, traumatic experiences during childhood influence gang members'

attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Frisby-Osman & Wood, 2020).

The current study recognizes that traumatic experiences during childhood combined with

community trauma influenced gang members' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors; untreated

traumas significantly influenced the tit-for-tat attitude. The presence of gangs in the

neighborhood and the increased likelihood of encountering traumatic experiences contribute to

community trauma. The untreated trauma most of the participants encountered during their

childhood left them with wounds they could not heal, resulting in them inflicting trauma onto others in their community without remorse. In the same context, it can be inferred that the everyday trauma surrounding the participants skewed their ethical point of view. Although many participants acknowledged that children, women, and the elderly are off-limits to them, it implies that despite getting involved in gang-related violence and criminality, their values and moral compass are still unbroken. Participants strongly agreed that harming others who have harmed them or disrespected them in any way is grounds for violence. Inherently, there is little consideration for morality not to take a life, while disrespecting the law was observed as part of the unspoken rules of gangs. Gang members often prefer to take matters into their own hands. Aggressive behaviors and violence mediated gang members' relationships.

Influence of Trauma at a Young Age

During their childhoods, participants in this study were all subjected to incidents and situations that could be defined as traumatic. Childhood trauma is one of the most significant challenges facing children. Despite numerous efforts to prevent exposure to childhood trauma, new forms of trauma and new facilitators of childhood trauma, like the internet, have accelerated the crisis (Yearwood et al., 2017). Although childhood trauma and victimization exposure rates vary depending on the survey used, these figures have ranged between 38% and 85% depending on the associated social environments and socioeconomic factors (Lewis et al., 2019; Saunders & Adams, 2014; Yearwood et al., 2017). The National Institute for Children's Health Quality (2021) estimates that 34.8 million American children – approximately half of the children population – are exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or traumatic events. Unfortunately, most of these children do not get the necessary support to understand and overcome their experiences. Additionally, La Greca et al. (2015) added that after experiencing

traumatic events, the lack of support services, lack of awareness, lack of a voice, fear of the

perpetrators, and stigmatization are the key reasons children fail to get help after traumatic

experiences. The findings revealed that untreated trauma is a leading predictor that increases the

risk and likelihood of becoming involved in violence and gang activities. After experiencing

traumatic events, these participants felt alone, hence causing community trauma. The traumatic

event cycle makes individuals feel isolated and disconnected from their communities, which can,

in turn, cause a sense of collective trauma within the community. This process involves the

withdrawal of affected individuals from their social connections, leading to a sense of

disconnection and fragmentation within the community. As a result, the community may

experience a collective sense of fear, helplessness, and grief. This highlights the importance of

community support and connection in promoting recovery after trauma. Untreated trauma makes

individuals believe that no one care or supports them in their time of need; as such, they develop

the "I don't care" attitude – so why should they care about anyone else? Consequently, it can be

established that encountering traumatic experiences inevitably contributes to community trauma;

for instance, children born in families with members already in gangs are highly likely to become

gang members.

Exposure to childhood trauma is also associated with poor school performance. Exposure

to traumatic events early in life can lead to poor developmental outcomes and reduced brain

cortexes, which impacts concentration. While traumatic experiences can diminish concentration

and disruption of learning time in the short term, they also pose long-term consequences like

poor memory retention, organizational difficulties, socio-emotional developmental problems,

and poor mental health, which are also associated with diminished cognition (Strøm et al., 2017).

These effects directly affect learning and academic performance. According to Strøm et al.

(2017), children who experience trauma are likely to score lower grades, develop behaviors that could lead to expulsion, drop out of school, and fail to qualify for and/or enroll in higher education. Victims of traumatic experiences may also develop poor coping strategies and experience difficulties with decision-making and problem-solving, which could affect word choice and their performance in school (Strøm et al., 2017). The problem worsens among people with long-term difficulties, such as physical and cognitive limitations, and those who have been victims of traumatic incidents (Wolff et al., 2020). The study found that the lack of guidance and support from positive role models during traumatic experiences (killing a family member or being associated with an enemy gang) heightened the introduction of younger individuals to violence and crimes, such as being easily forced to join gangs. Inherently, the lack of adequate support and guidance implies the lack of appropriate coping strategies and poor decisions.

Children who experience trauma tend to have socialization difficulties throughout their lives, and exposure to traumatic experiences is a direct cause of poor socio-emotional development. Recent studies have observed widespread dissociation, self-isolation, denial, and poor social skills among persons who experienced trauma early in life (Downey & Crummy, 2022). Saunders and Adams (2014) add that the lack of attachment with abusive parents and caregivers may aggravate the trauma problem beyond recovery.

Deviance and behavioral issues are common problems observed in children who have been trauma victims in a gang setting. Cross et al. (2019) found that children who experience or witness trauma tend to develop shame, poor self-image, low self-esteem, and guilt in their childhood and later in life. These children are also at higher risk of bullying or abusing their peers under minimal provocation. Downey and Crummy (2022) report that many victims of childhood trauma develop poor behaviors like violence, aggression, impulsivity, and fright,

among others. These persons are also more likely to develop alcoholism and drug abuse later in life as they attempt to cope with the unresolved trauma. Additionally, persons who were abused early in life are more likely to become abusive themselves (Yearwood et al., 2017). More than a quarter of these children (27%) also develop conduct disorder (Lewis et al., 2019). These problems may worsen in cases where children are vilified and stigmatized for their experiences, which calls for a need to accommodate and support these fragile beings to ensure that they feel accepted in society.

Trauma can also cause bodily injury, impacting a child's health. For example, children who have experienced physical or sexual abuse may have long-term health difficulties or impairments that influence their lives and decisions. Nevertheless, a substantial segment of society fails to recognize the dangers that emotional abuse and indirect trauma exposure can bring to children. Victims of childhood trauma are likely to struggle with psychological problems like anxiety and depression. However, the greatest risk involves developing posttraumatic stress disorder, whose effects are often lasting. A recent study found that 7.8% of persons exposed to trauma-exposed children developed PTSD, while 29.2%, 22.9%, and 15.9% developed major depressive disorder, conduct disorder, and alcohol dependence, respectively (Lewis et al., 2019). Some of these health problems are long-term, and the victims could be forced to live with the consequences throughout their lifespan. Although some can be treated, delayed mental and physical health support access could inhibit recovery and lead to destructive behaviors such as gang affiliation.

Witnessing or experiencing trauma early in life has a significant and negative impact on the victim/witness, which creates a ground for a gang setting. As explained earlier, many victims develop physical and mental health complications that could last throughout their lives.

Additionally, others experience developmental problems or adopt poor behaviors that could affect their ability to interact with others, develop positive relationships, and function. All these factors can negatively affect the victim's quality of life. These health problems affect the victims' ability to function, derive happiness, and lead everyday lives. Nevertheless, the problem is exacerbated in victims who drop out of school and develop alcohol or substance dependence as they struggle with unresolved traumatic experiences. The discrimination and vilification these victims face in society also affect their coping with life. Diminished functionality and poor health outcomes lower the victims' life expectancy. It is also important to note that many lives are lost during or as a consequence of childhood trauma. Recent estimates show that two deaths occur in every 100,000 children who are victims of child abuse, which is a sizeable number considering all other forms of trauma experienced by more than 10 million American children annually (Huecker et al., 2022). Studies also show that up to 20.1% of children who experience trauma tend to harm themselves and others, while 11.9% attempt suicide (Lewis et al., 2019). As such, the consequences of witnessing or experiencing trauma early in life are far worse than most people perceive.

In summary, many children experience or witness trauma yearly, and most victims do not get support. Unfortunately, these victims are at elevated risks of poor developmental delays/problems, school performance, socialization difficulties, deviant behavior, poor mental/psychological health outcomes, poor quality of life, and a decline in life expectancy. Thus, stakeholders like parents, schools, communities, governments, and non-governmental agencies must collaborate to identify at-risk persons and victims of childhood trauma. These children should be provided with appropriate support services like counseling, access to health

and protective services, and better access to education to resolve these traumatic experiences and

prevent their consequences from harming the victims throughout their lifespan.

Poverty and Trauma

According to Collins et al. (2010), families and their members, specifically children,

operate interdependently. Each one of the members of the family performs vital functions and

roles in the context of the multifaceted relationship. When family members are exposed to

traumatic situations, they can be negatively affected due to stressful conditions linked with life in

poor conditions, whether in urban areas or other places. Thus, poverty contributes to and

escalates trauma in families, mostly in urban settings where environmental stressors are said to

be among the causes. Collins et al. (2010) state that poverty adds to the amount of trauma

exposure and distress due to the hassles and burdens of daily life. Although some societies try to

deal with the trauma, the communities, and family relations are the first casualties when the

coping resources deplete. Unsurprisingly, the participants in this study, whom all lived in low-

income urban communities located in a city in Essex County, NJ, were exposed to traumatic

events very young. People in poor communities have different coping mechanisms for poverty;

in distressing situations, most people cannot respond to their situations appropriately, leading to

failure in routine family functions (Garo et al., 2018). From a different perspective, Hecht et al.

(2018) noted that trauma leads to a lack of safety and protection from harm for children and the

inability to provide basic needs; such situations are traumatic. As a result, the communities

attempt to find alternative ways as they ponder how to adapt and develop in such traumatic

situations. Families and communities that cannot sustain themselves are prone to threats like

violence, among other ill vices.

In communities such as the ones in which these participants lived, crisis cycles repeat daily and across generations. As some participants mentioned, they had family members (including fathers and uncles) and siblings who were in gangs, so the decision to join a gang was not so challenging. Although it has been argued that community functioning and parental response are potent tools to mediate between trauma and how it affects children, further studies are needed to establish how societies promote adaptation and resiliency and lead to positive outcomes in traumatic situations. This is because communities living in low-income neighborhoods are constantly exposed to several ongoing traumas, increasing the chances of adverse outcomes. From a community trauma standpoint, Hinsberger et al. (2016) further inform that families that raise children in low-income neighborhoods routinely experience trauma associated with substance use, community and family violence, and conflict. In the same context, children raised in low-income communities have been established to face more adverse environmental factors and experiences compared to their counterparts in higher socioeconomic societies (Rosen et al., 2018; Benjamin & Carolissen, 2015). Accordingly, from a community trauma perspective, poverty exacerbates poverty-related trauma, inhibiting individuals' ability to seek help and support services for trauma exposure. Violence will likely occur in poverty-stricken communities as some people turn to crime, thinking it can solve their problems. Thus, children and individuals growing up in such conditions are likely to experience several traumatic events, with the first occurrence being at a very young age. As reported by the participants, many suffered the loss of a loved one or witnessed the killing of someone before age fourteen. Comprehensively, such children and adolescents undergo adverse life occurrences, making them develop traumatic distress at higher rates than those in higher socioeconomic neighborhoods. Repeated exposure to the same adverse traumas has been associated with complicated reactions

occurring before and after they witness or experience traumatic events. Such experiences have

been further linked to poor coping strategies and decisions, such as joining gangs to access

money and protection.

Unlike their wealthier area counterparts, children growing up in impoverished

communities will likely witness their family members being murdered due to violence. As a

result, they are always on the lookout to monitor and avoid dangers and aggression. Unlike

suburban communities, where children would more likely be taken for therapies and other

counseling in these circumstances, people in urban communities cannot afford such services or

are unaware of their existence and importance. One participant acknowledged this, stating that

more professional services are needed in urban communities and their schools. He claimed there

was little to no support for victims, witnesses, and/or trauma survivors in his community. Thus,

children will continue to grow under traumatic conditions, contributing to more stress and

insecurity (Roberts, 2020). In many cases, these children/adolescents are not getting the affection

and care they need, making it easier to team up with other "broken" community members as they

seek reassurance and support. As Roberts (2020) asserted, neglect, separation from the parents,

and poverty are recipes for toxic stress.

There have been efforts to explain why children and people in poor communities have

more severe traumatic experiences than in other places with gang settings. However, such efforts

mainly focus on the cumulative effects of several episodes of trauma. Nevertheless, one reason

this occurs is that when people are exposed to one traumatic episode, they tend to feel insecure

and anticipate more trauma since they do not know how to control it (Gorn, 2016). Thus, when

children or adolescents deal with the impact of one trauma, they are more likely to develop more

episodes since they are exposed to the same chronic situations that do not help their brains

develop a positive mindset. Therefore, a combination of the anticipation of more traumatic

occurrences and previous experiences leads to long-term changes in most people. As a result, the

chances of PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) can develop. Anticipatory anxiety has been

linked to symptoms similar to PTSD syndromes, such as preoccupation, vigilance, enactments,

fears, nightmares, and avoidance. The anxiety might also lead to developing coping mechanisms

and other symptoms related to the complex of PTSD. In addition to PTSD, exposure to gangs,

incarceration, drug activities, victimization, family violence, maltreatment, or death of family

members, also heightened anxiety and coping mechanisms.

Trauma and Gangs

Trauma has been shown to make people feel unsafe. Although the results of traumatic

experiences vary from one individual to another, the feeling of being abandoned promotes gang

membership: gangs act as auxiliary families. Accordingly, in line with the study phenomenon,

exposure to ongoing traumas influences the feeling of abandonment and a perception that

inflicting trauma on other community members without remorse is justified – a form of revenge.

According to Quinn et al. (2017), official approximations indicate that there are over 30,000

gangs comprised of more than 750,000 members across the US—the risks of entering a gang

increase in early adolescence. Youths in poor communities tend to move in and out of gangs

during their lives. Essentially, from the understanding that adolescents lack adequate support and

guidance from positive role models, they are highly likely to get involved in gangs because of

poor decisions following traumatic experiences that leave them feeling rejected, abandoned, and

grieved.

The participants in this study identified at least one of those factors, with many belonging

to the single-headed family and financial hardships category. Among the reasons connected to

gang participation include trauma, being raised by a single parent, financial challenges, or the inability to access or supply basic requirements for the family (Cepeda et al., 2016). Many participants expressed their financial struggles growing up, as their single-parent households struggled to provide for themselves and their siblings. Poverty and single-headed households hold higher expectations of men who are expected to change family socioeconomic situations. Poverty and single-parent households can be significant challenges for families, particularly in meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. In many cases, these challenges can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety for parents and children as they navigate the difficulties of daily life.

Another factor that has been recognized as why people may join gangs is the perception that schools are unsafe places (mainly due to traumatic experiences and exposure to violent acts), either in school or surrounding environments. Many participants expressed how unsafe schools can be for gang members or relatives of gang members. They did not believe that schools and educators were equipped to deal with gang rivalry, so they felt it safer to stay out of school. School shootings and killings heighten the perception that school environments are unsafe and dangerous (Frederique, 2020). In the same context, Hendricks (2019) further affirmed that traumatic encounters experienced in school environments force students to stop going to school prematurely, stripping students of the possibility of forming positive relations, building their cognitive capacity, and access to positive role models. Traumatic experiences several participants faced forced them to stop going to school.

Rawles (2010) reported that trauma increases the risks of future victimization and violence perpetration. This is evident as the participants in this study all experienced traumatic events before their gang involvement and membership. Empirical studies also show that young

men and women are exposed to traumatic events, they will likely join gangs to avoid victimization (Sutton, 2017). The youth assume they might be future victims of the same; thus, they need to protect themselves or attack other community members before they attack. This logic was demonstrated by one of the participants who told the researcher to stay dangerous when she initially told him to be safe. The participant's explanation for this phrase is that staying dangerous reduces the likelihood of someone else attacking you and you becoming a victim of violence. In his mind, safe people are attacked more often than dangerous people and are always ready to protect themselves by any means necessary. This implies that some people inflict trauma on others as a way of self-defense or to show the members of the community that they are powerful. Since children learn from what they see, violence in their communities inspires and validates such behavior since the gang members are their most available role models. The absence of social protection in impoverished societies also propagates the environmental factors influencing gang involvement. Thus, youth joining gangs is perceived to secure economic benefits since they feel the other members of the state or country have disproportionately rejected them. This, coupled with trauma, the feeling of powerlessness, and being economically disadvantaged, leads to the idea that the rewards of gang membership outweigh the associated risks of joining a gang.

Gang Affiliation and Education

Gang membership has become a significant problem related to community trauma in low-income neighborhoods. Recent estimates show that about a million Americans aged 5-17 are affiliated with gangs (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). The majority of the children (90%) who are affiliated with gangs are male. These estimates further show that the problem peaks when these individuals are between 13 and 15 years, while it remains considerably high during their teen

years (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). Notably, this is a stage where the children are supposed to attend school and build a firm foundation for further studies, employment, and a healthy life. Despite numerous efforts by governments and communities to implement measures to prevent gang affiliation at the K-12 educational level, the problem continues to worsen (Brazil, 2020). Experts warn that gang affiliation negatively impacts education in areas like poor academic performance, absenteeism, high dropout rates, drug/substance abuse, incarceration, disruption of learning, and even deaths (Carson & Esbensen, 2017; Howell,201; Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). This section explores how gang affiliation affects education to inform governments, communities, and schools about the severity of the problem and the need for action.

Gang membership is a crucial cause of poor academic performance, thus creating room for trauma and community trauma. Notably, children who are members of these gangs are likelier to perform poorly in school due to a lack of concentration in their studies and dedication to the gang's activities. Studies have also found a strong correlation between gang involvement and poor school attitude, low academic achievement, disruption of learning due to fights, unsafe learning environments, and lack of school connectedness (Chiprany, 2011; Martinez *et al.,* 2014). The disconnect between students and occasional conflicts are significant inhibitors of poor performance among students who need a safe learning environment. Some studies have also found that gang affiliation or the presence of gang members in schools demotivates teachers and their commitment to teaching their students (Carson & Esbensen, 2017). Other than disrupting learning by creating an unsafe learning environment for other students, learners affiliated with gangs may also lack support from their counterparts. According to Martinez et al. (2014), these students are more likely to be discriminated against and stigmatized by their counterparts due to their identity. Consequently, they may be affected directly by a lack of support and indirectly by

a lack of morale for learning. Unless schools and other stakeholders develop effective preventive measures and support for these children, they will continue to perform poorer than their school counterparts later in life.

Children who are affiliated with gangs tend to spend limited time at school. Notably, many of these students are disengaged from their studies and will spend a significant amount of their time attending activities related to their gangs. Studies have also found that gang members have higher rates of truancy, expulsion from schools, and dropout (Howell, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2019). For instance, these students may miss their classes or quit school altogether to concentrate on crime or gang activities. At the same time, the high prevalence of drug and substance abuse among these groups makes it difficult for them to attend classes and complete their studies. Many schools take action to keep students with gang affiliation from their institutions due to their zero-tolerance approach to gang affiliation and the high likelihood of these students violating the school policies (Carson & Esbensen, 2017; Estrada et al., 2013).

Similarly, Pyrooz (2014) examined the effect of gang membership on K-12 education attainment and established that gang involvement resulted in a 30% less likelihood of graduating from higher school and a 58% less likelihood of attaining a four-year degree. In the same perspective, given that most traumatic experiences or gang-related disruptions that influence the onset of gang involvement are encountered during the K-12 educational years, the consequences of gang membership and community trauma can be determined to spill over into a range of life domains, including k-12 education (Sutherland & Parker, 2020). Consequently, concerning the established findings, the consequences of gang involvement on education and community trauma can be understood from a historical context; unless these schools take a different approach to deterring gang affiliation, their students will continue to face disruptions in their studies.

Gang membership exposes children to delinquency and other risks that deprive them of learning opportunities. Besides causing high school dropout rates, gang involvement is also a leading cause of delinquency in the US and other parts of the world. According to Howell (2010), many children join gangs due to peer pressure or a false sense of protection. Gang involvement is closely associated with delinquency, aggression, violence, and drug abuse. There are also documented cases of voluntary manslaughter, murder, aggravated sexual abuse, and armed robbery by these children (Chiprany, 2011). Such delinquent behavior can easily lead to incarceration. Recent studies show that juvenile incarceration in the US is the highest globally, at more than two million (Barnet et al., 2015). Many youths are more likely to be rearrested due to their high recidivism rate. Other than incarceration, these youths are also more likely to miss learning opportunities due to suspension and expulsion by their school administrators. As such, youths affiliated with gangs lose valuable time and a stage where they should attend their studies. From the same perspective, from treating community trauma and preventing the onset of gang involvement, it has been found that life situations, environments, violence, and a skewed way of thinking facilitate the decision to join gangs. Ritter et al. (2014) further suggested that communities must intervene in the gang problem by providing safe schooling environments and improving educational outcomes and life course attainments. Consequently, it can be inferred that community trauma and environmental factors that influence gang involvement can be adequately intervened during the K-12 years to reduce the likelihood of children adopting the gang lifestyle later in adulthood.

Disruption of learning is also a key concern stemming from gang affiliation. Studies have found that almost a quarter (23%) of all school fights are due to gang rivalries (Carson & Esbensen, 2017). These fights are often vicious and could easily disrupt classroom or school

learning. Unlike typical conflicts between children, fights against gangs may also threaten gang members' and fellow students' safety and lives. These disruptions were reported in October 2021 when two rival teen gangs engaged in a gunfight outside a Brooklyn high school. According to Zilber and Diaz (2021), Midwood High School went into lockdown and disrupted learning for more than 4500 students following the shootout just outside the school's premises. This was the second time a shootout from rival teen gangs occurred in the neighborhood within a month. In their article, Zilber and Diaz (2021) provided video footage and police reports regarding numerous gun violence incidents among rival gangs that had occurred near or within schools in New York within months. These incidents often leave learners terrified and may traumatize the victims and witnesses long after the incidents have occurred. The concept of disruptions is also closely linked to school safety issues. Cases of teens killing their fellow students or teachers have been widely documented in news stories throughout the US (Ellis & Hanna, 2016; Rocha, 2015). Such killings or deadly gang rivalries cause safety concerns, often making learning difficult for other students and teachers. Carson and Esbensen (2017) also found that some families transfer their students from schools due to fear of high rates of gang affiliation among students and the high risk of violence. Such safety concerns will likely demotivate teachers, cause high turnover rates, and dissuade experienced teachers from working in these schools. Consequently, community trauma can spill over to the educational environment, where gang membership significantly disrupts educational activities, leading to poor outcomes for the gang members and their innocent counterparts.

The research evidence above has presented some disturbing facts and shed light on the deteriorating relationship between gang affiliation and education. Although the statistics may be true, there is not much research on "why" there is a considerable disconnect between gang

affiliation and education. The participants in this study give a little insight into the "why," and it is not as black and white as many people may think. Participants explained that school might be just as dangerous for them as it is for non-gang-affiliated students. Many participants had big hopes and dreams, and some still do. However, those dreams were put on hold for a variety of reasons. For some, losing a loved one or classmate left them traumatized and emotionally/ mentally unavailable to focus on school. For others, their parent(s) may have moved to another district, and now they are forced to attend a school their rivals attend. In many communities, a child is assigned to a school based on their zip code; this seems like a simple rule to follow, but for individuals in a gang or affiliated with one, moving to a new town can be a matter of life or death. A participant expressed that this is the reality for many youths living in this urban community located in Essex County, NJ, When his mother moved across town for economic reasons, he was no longer in the territory of the gang with which he was familiar. This made it difficult and dangerous for him to go to school. Eventually, he felt he had no choice but to drop out to save his life. Accordingly, as mentioned in the research above, many schools have zero-tolerance policies to bring order to the schools and eliminate the ones causing the disruption.

Although this may seem logical to many, this method fails hundreds of youths living in urban communities. As the participants suggest, education was taken away from them, not necessarily by choice, but as a means of survival. They, too, do not feel safe in their schools. They, too, are too traumatized to focus, and with little to no help or services, they begin to feel defeated and eventually quit. They are being targeted and must conform to extreme measures to protect themselves before being seriously hurt or killed. The participants believe that the school system, as well as their environmental factors, have failed them. Nevertheless, they continue to

point the fingers at gangs and gang-affiliated individuals as the sole culprits for any disruption in the community/schools.

In the future, school administrators should become more involved in deterring gang affiliation and gang activities in their schools. School administrators are criticized for not doing enough to identify and take action against gangs and gang members. However, Martinez et al. (2014) believe this blame should be directed not just to school administrators but also parents, teachers, and law enforcement agencies. Notably, each of these stakeholder groups tends to work individually in its efforts to curb youth gang affiliation. However, they fail to acknowledge their limitations and the immense success they could achieve if they worked collaboratively. Other than inaction by school administrators, the response among these groups is often flawed.

Researchers criticize the zero-tolerance gang affiliation policies in schools as inefficient and misinformed since they do not proactively address the problem (Carson & Esbensen, 2017). In this case, school administrators must develop preventive measures and work with other stakeholders toward establishing support programs for these students. Howell (2010) recommends conducting awareness campaigns, sensitizing the students about the dangers of gang affiliation, and offering counseling services to at-risk students. Such approaches could effectively deter gang affiliation, reduce the risk of retaliation against students who report gang members, and create a safe learning environment (Barnert et al., 2015; Pyrooz, 2013). Additionally, these proactive measures will reduce the risk of gang affiliation in schools, reduce the disruption of learning, and safeguard learning opportunities for all students by reducing their risk of incarceration.

Limitations

There are a few limitations presented in this research study. Participants may have yet to discover the truth due to the sensitivity and legality of the topic under discussion. Although the researcher reiterated that all participants' identities would remain anonymous, some participants may have been skeptical, causing them to withhold information, affecting the results. Likewise, there may have been some participants who made up scenarios or situations to appear more attuned to gang activities during their interviews. It is possible that over-exaggeration of the truth could have appeared more appealing or "gangster" to the researcher.

All data collected was self-reported data. Self-reported data often leaves room for inaccuracy. The researcher must base their findings on what was reported and not necessarily on facts based on legal documents, observations, or eyewitness reports (Haenschen, 2020). Lastly, the sample size in this study was relatively small and consisted of only black males from an urban community located in Essex County, NJ, who are/were gang affiliated. The sample size was insignificant, participants were highly close in characteristics, and the researcher chose them. A mixture of male and female gang members, including individuals from urban communities outside of this urban community located in Essex County, NJ, may have yielded different results/outcomes, allowing for a greater chance to generalize the findings accurately.

Implications

Hundreds of qualitative and quantitative research studies focus on gang activity, crime, and urban communities (Sampson & Wilson, 2020; Stuart, 2020; Zhao & Tang, 2018). Very little research discusses these issues from the perspective of a gang member and ties in together with community trauma. The findings from this study can yield several implications for future research, including the morality and codes of gang members, gang members outside the city of this urban community located in Essex County, NJ, and female gang members. Additionally, a

similar study can use non-gang-affiliated community members to gain their perspective on the topic and quantitative research methods.

Moreover, the environment of individuals influences the individual's actions and behavior. Based on the study findings, in the trauma community, gang activities are associated with the vicinity of gangsters and the families to which they belong. Such an environment has influenced their activities in society at large. This is in line with the study of Ortiz (2019), who revealed that criminal behavior is predisposed by both shared and genetically environmentally friendly factors. Furthermore, the study found that risk factors that can facilitate engaging in crime, like gang activities, include family, peers, society, economics, substance, and drugs. Therefore, the above risk factors are also linked to the gang and trauma community in the current study.

Additionally, numerous models and considerations exist on who is to blame for the trauma in urban communities. According to Zhao and Tang (2018), families uncovered to urban paucity face a lopsided risk of exposure to trauma and flattering trauma-organized families. Factors connected with urban poverty, such as low community safety, daily stresses, and cultural discrimination, have been presented to increase the risk that trauma will harmfully impact family operations. The erosion in household functioning endangers the capability of kinfolks to make an operative utilization of structured management approaches and confines the accomplishment of treatments that need family provision. Thus, there is a need for family dealings that are subtle to the traumatic setting of city poverty, that comprise engagement plans that integrate alliances with basic and extended household systems that build domestic managing skills and recognize cultural disparities in household roles and purposes to respond to the needs of this populace sufficiently. The researcher maintains that extra treatment progress study is required to advance the trauma,

especially in gang families, in its understanding and distribution of trauma-well-versed services to the target families.

Additionally, schools must work closely with families and communities to identify children at risk of or who have experienced trauma, prevent traumatic experiences, and provide support services like counseling. This implies that teachers and other school personnel may collaborate closely with families and others in the community to establish a safe and supportive environment for children. When children suffer from terrible events, they may be taught the value of seeking assistance and support, and they may be provided therapy or other services to help them cope with trauma. The objective is to foster a caring and supportive culture within the school and community, so all children feel respected, heard, and supported.

Lastly, further research can explore community trauma and behaviors of gang members outside of this urban community located in Essex County, NJ, and female gang members. It would be interesting to see if there are common factors of intersectionality across different cities, states, and gender. Findings in this study proposed that the aspects of the participant's social identities and environmental factors played a considerable role in their life decisions and outcome. Some participants sometimes had no "real" choices due to their environment and/or family involvement in the gang-affiliated activity. Future research can further examine these environmental factors and family influences related to gang affiliation and possibly create programming to help increase the quality of life and derail the path to gang affiliation for many individuals.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine community trauma and the behaviors of gang members, as told through the perspective of gang members. The major themes discussed in this study

included how untreated trauma influences behaviors that contribute to community trauma, family and environmental influences, inherited gang activity, gangs being family-like, barriers and expectations of gang members, and the moral compass of gang members. Findings suggest that although gang members admit to contributing to trauma in their communities, they do not believe they are at fault. They believe that their environment and the barriers placed in their communities are more so to blame for their lifestyle. The study also contributed to the literature by exposing that gang members can have a moral compass, despite displaying immoral behavior.

Movies, games, and even some literature can sometimes portray gang members as angry individuals who incite territorial wars, commit acts of senseless violence, and willingly choose the gang lifestyle. This study suggests that there are underlying issues that stem way beyond choice. Environmental influences, unaddressed traumatic experiences, childhood upbringing, educational barriers, feelings of hopelessness, and financial hardships all played a significant role in these young men turning to a gang-affiliated lifestyle. The review of literature discussed in this study hinted at the hardship low-income communities, such as this urban community located in Essex County, NJ, may face. The participants in this study represent real-life examples of individuals whose environmental factors significantly negatively impacted their lives.

Unfortunately, the code to crack this history of community trauma, specifically in urban communities, has yet to be discovered. There are many theories and discussions on who is to blame for the trauma in urban communities and unattainable solutions on how to end it.

Regardless, this study concludes that gang members do not believe they are 100% to blame. Therefore, there is a need to scrutinize the sources of community trauma, outcomes, and strategies that can be embraced to minimize episodes of community trauma, thus creating a peaceful environment that encourages sustainable co-existence.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1) How would you describe your childhood experiences?

2) Have you ever experienced something you think significantly impacted your life in a negative way?

3) How old were you when you first became affiliated with a gang and what was happening in your life at that time that made you decide to become gang affiliated?

4) As a person who has had some gang affiliation in their life, how do you feel about gangs as it relates to violence in your community?

5) Do you feel or have you ever felt any responsibility for the violence in your community? If not, who do you feel is ultimately responsible for the homicides, robberies, theft, etc.?

6) How does your environment/community make you feel and think about your life/future/goals?

7) What messages are you receiving from your community?

8) What do you think is the most problematic issue that residents in your community face today and why?

Appendix B

Demographics and Pre-Screening Questions

What ethnicity or nationality do you identify with?

How old are you?

Where were you born?

How long have you lived in this community, which is located in Essex County, NJ?

What is your highest level of education?

Are you now or ever were associated with a gang? If yes how long?

Are you fluent in the English language?

Do you speak any other languages? If so what are they?