Gang Membership, Delinquent Peers, and Delinquent Behavior

Sara R. Battin-Pearson, Terence P. Thornberry, J. David Hawkins, and Marvin D. Krohn

The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public’s fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP’s) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.

Gang membership intensifies delinquent behavior. From the earliest to the most recent investigations, criminologists have consistently found that, when compared with youth who do not belong to gangs, gang members are far more involved in delinquency, especially serious and violent delinquency. Associating with delinquent peers also contributes to delinquency. Indeed, peer delinquency is one of the strongest predictors of delinquency that researchers have identified. However, the effect of belonging to a gang has not been separated from the effect of simply associating with delinquent peers.

Some gang researchers have suggested that gang membership constitutes a qualitatively different experience than merely associating with delinquent peer groups. For example, Moore states that “...gangs are no longer just at the rowdy end of the continuum of local adolescent groups—they are now really outside that continuum” (1991:132). Klein makes a similar point: “...street gangs are something special, something qualitatively different from other groups and from other categories of law breakers” (1985:197). Although these and other researchers view gangs as “qualitatively different” until recently no study had attempted to disentangle the influence of gang membership from the effects of delinquent peers on involvement in delinquency.

In 1997, studies conducted by the Seattle Social Development Project and the Rochester Youth Development Study with funding from OJJDP both answered the question, “Does gang membership contribute to delinquency above and beyond the influence of associating with delinquent peers?” The answer was yes in both cities, despite significant differences in demographics.

After describing study methods and results, the authors summarize the implications of their findings. One crucial implication is that communities developing comprehensive approaches to reducing juvenile violence and victimization must consider the role of youth gangs and the necessity of including youth gang prevention, intervention, and suppression components.

From the Administrator

Youth gangs are on the rise. Today they threaten virtually every major city, many small communities, and even rural areas. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is committed to helping communities overcome this problem, and an essential first step is understanding the factors that contribute to the growth of youth gangs and the relationship of gang membership to delinquency.

The results from the Seattle Social Development Project reported in this Bulletin were originally published in Criminology 36(1): 93-118, 1998. American Society of Criminology.
Seattle Social Development Project

Project Overview

The Seattle Social Development Project study was guided by the Model (Catalano and others, 1987). The model incorporates information about both positive and negative social environments. The model builds on the social learning theory (Cressey, 1953), social learning theory (Bandura, 1969), and social control theory (Cressey, 1953). The model hypothesis is that delinquent behavior is produced by the costs and rewards of prosocial or delinquent association, the degree of involvement in prosocial or delinquent behavior, the degree of involvement in delinquency, and the costs and rewards for prosocial or antisocial behavior. The study involved 208 children since they entered the fifth grade in 1985. The sample includes nearly equal numbers of males (n=113) and females (n=96). Slightly fewer than half (46 percent) identified themselves as European-Americans. African-Americans (24 percent) and Asian-Americans (21 percent) also made up substantial portions of the sample. The remaining youth were Native-American (6 percent) or of other ethnic groups (3 percent). Forty-six percent of respondents' parents reported a maximum family income under $20,000 per year in 1985, and more than half of the sample (52 percent) participated in the National School Lunch/School Breakfast Program at some point in the fifth through seventh grades, when the youth were age 13 (n=854), 14 (n=778), and 15 (n=781). Sample sizes vary for each assessment year based on the number of respondents who completed the interview in that year. Nonparticipation was not related to gender, lifetime use of tobacco or alcohol, or participation in delinquency by age 10, nor was it consistently related to ethnicity. Data were obtained from the youth and from King County court records.

Methods

To determine whether gang membership contributes to delinquency above and beyond associating with delinquent peers, the SSDP sample was divided into the following three groups:

- Gang members: Respondents who self-reported membership in a gang in the past year and who identified the gang by name.
- Youth with delinquent peers: Respondents who were not members of a gang in the survey year but who reported that at least two of their three best friends had been arrested or done things that could get them in trouble with the police.
- Youth with nondelinquent peers: Respondents who were not members of a gang in the survey year and who

### Classification of Individual Offense Rates (Seattle Social Development Project)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense or Frequency</th>
<th>NDRs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hitting teacher, hitting to hurt, picking a fight, using force to get things, throwing objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking something worth more than $50, taking something worth between $5 and $50, breaking into a house, destroying property, writing graffiti, selling illegal drugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined self-reported violent and nonviolent offenses and frequency of being arrested and in trouble with the police</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple assault, aggravated assault, hit and run, murder, threat, robbery, sex offense, disorderly conduct, using a weapon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson, reckless arson, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, trespassing, prostitution, stolen property, selling illegal drugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined court-recorded violent and nonviolent offenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-year frequency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-month frequency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-month incidence of drinking five or more drinks in a row</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-year frequency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past-year frequency of using crack, other forms of cocaine, amphetamines, tranquilizers, sedatives, narcotics, psychedelics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

The analysis was done cross-sectionally (comparing age 15 group status with age 15 behaviors) and longitudinally (comparing age 15 group status with age 15 behaviors). The cross-sectional results at age 15 are presented in Figures 1 and 2. Examination of the cross-sectional results and therefore are not presented. Figure 1 presented the mean IOR's for court-recorded delinquency. Figure 3 presents measures of self-reported substance use. The data presented next to the mean delinquency rates for gang members were significantly higher than those of delinquents substance use.

For this analysis, t-tests were conducted to determine whether observed differences from the mean IOR's for youth with nondelinquent peers, higher for youth with delinquent peers, and higher for gang members. For example, as shown in Figure 1, youth with nondelinquent peers committed an average of 1.6 self-reported acts of violent delinquency in the past year, while youth with delinquent peers committed an average of 5.1 violent acts and gang members committed more than 11 violent acts.

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An asterisk indicates that the rates for gang members are significantly higher than those for youth with delinquent peers (t-test, p<0.05).

Note: IOR, individual offense rate.
Figure 3: Self-Reported Rates of Drug Selling and Substance Use at Age 15 (Seattle Social Development Project)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Self-Reported Offense</th>
<th>Nondelinquent peers (n=643)</th>
<th>Delinquent peers (n=87)</th>
<th>Gang members (n=51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana Use</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binge Drinking</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Illicit Drug Use</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*An asterisk indicates that the rates for gang members are significantly higher than those for youth with delinquent peers (t-test, p<0.05).*

The path coefficient, an estimate of the strength of the causal relationship, can range from -1 to +1.

R², the amount of a given behavior that is explained by prior variables in the model. R² can range from 0 to 1.

An acknowledgment that factors other than those included in the model can contribute to the behavior (called the "error" and not usually quantified).

A measure of the overall fit of the model that can range from 0 to 1.

Specifically, the effect of gang membership on delinquency at age 15 was examined, controlling for association with delinquent friends at ages 14 and 15 and for delinquency at age 13. If gang membership provides a unique and strong contribution to delinquency above and beyond that made by associating with delinquent peers and previous delinquency, then the path coefficients from gang membership to delinquency should be significant in the causal models presented in figures 4 and 5.

The results revealed that gang membership contributed to delinquency above and beyond associating with delinquent peers and previous delinquency behavior. As shown in figure 4, the paths from gang membership at age 14 and at age 15 to self-reported general delinquency at age 15 were significant, even when associating with delinquent friends and previous delinquency were included in the model (path coefficients of 0.18 and 0.22, respectively, p<0.01). Similar patterns were found for court-recorded delinquency, as shown in figure 5.

Overall, SSDP respondents who were gang members always had the highest rates of delinquency and substance use. For 9 of the 11 delinquency and substance use measures, rates for gang members were significantly higher than those for youth with delinquent peers. In addition, structural equation modeling revealed that gang membership contributed to delinquency even after the effects of delinquent peers and previous delinquency had been accounted for.

Rochester Youth Development Study

Project Overview

The Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS) is a longitudinal study of the development of delinquency and drug use, guided by interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987) and social network theory (Krohn, 1986). According to interactional theory, delinquency comes about because of the pattern of interactions between the individual and his or her environment. As bonds to conventional society (e.g., parents and teachers) weaken, social control is reduced and delinquency becomes more likely. For prolonged serious delinquency to emerge, however, association with other delinquent youth and the formation of delinquent beliefs are required. Once these delinquent patterns emerge, they have feedback effects. Further, undermining the person's bond to conventional society. These mutually reinforcing effects create trajectories toward increasing levels of involvement in delinquency. Social network theory is a complementary perspective that focuses on the impact of the social groups, or networks, in which the person is involved. All networks control the behavior of their members and channel that behavior toward consistency with group norms. Prosocial networks (e.g., Boy Scouts) increase the likelihood of conforming behavior; antisocial networks (e.g.,...
Equation Model: Self-Reported General Delinquency as Outcome Measure

Methods

The sample is 75 percent female and 25 percent minority group, with 5 percent African-American, 25 percent Latino (Puerto Rican), and 70 percent White. The sample is split into quartile groupings based on their responses to the delinquent peer associations scale. Each respondent was asked to report how many of his or her friends were involved in eight delinquent activities. The lowest quartile represents the respondents who had the fewest delinquent friends; the highest quartile represents those who had the most delinquent friends. The division of nonmembers into quartiles allows for a much finer comparison of gang members with nonmembers since the nonmembers in the highest quartile are very heavily involved with delinquent peers. The groups were compared in terms of the frequency with which they self-reported general delinquency, violent delinquency, drug selling, and drug use (see figures 6 and 7). Comparisons were made separately for males and females (see figures 6 and 7).

Results

Figure 6 shows the comparison of male gang members with nonmembers in terms of the frequency of general delinquency, violent delinquency, drug selling, and drug use. Among those who were not gang members, offense rates for all four types of offenses were higher for the respondents who scored higher on the delinquent peer associations scale. More important, however, was the finding that respondents who were gang members always had the highest rates of offending. The results of the comparison of offense rates of gang members and nonmembers with delinquent peers in Rochester provide a strikingly similar picture to those obtained with the Seattle data. Although associating with delinquent peers is related to offense rates, being a member of a gang facilitates delinquency.
higher involvement as compared with nonmembers. There is a particularly striking effect for drug selling—among female respondents, only gang members sold drugs.

As with the earlier Seattle analysis, this analysis does not control for the impact of association with delinquent peers. The earlier analysis of the Seattle data controlled for the effect of delinquent peers in examining the impact of gang membership on violent delinquency. To provide a more rigorous examination of whether gang membership has an effect on offense rates, the RYDS controlled for five additional risk factors that covered the domains of family (poverty level and parental supervision), school, stress, and prior delinquency. These additional variables test the possibility that...
Gang members have been found to have higher self-reported violence rates than nonmembers because of their background, higher rates of prior risk factor membership, and an increase in risk factors. The variables that were held constant in the study include family poverty level, parental supervision, commitment to school, negative life events, previous involvement in violence, and association with delinquent peers. The risk factors were measured at the interview prior to the year of gang membership. The analysis is limited to males because of the relatively small number of female gang members.

The results in Table 3 indicate that even when the variables listed above are held constant, gang membership still exerts a strong impact on the incidence of violent delinquency. The regression coefficient for gang membership was approximately 0.27. Indeed, gang membership has the greatest impact of any of the variables measured.

These results can be interpreted as supporting the hypothesis that gang membership is a significant risk factor for violent delinquency. Indeed, gang membership has the greatest impact of any of the variables measured.

Table 3: Various Risk Factors on the Incidence of Self-Reported Violence, Males Only (Rochester Youth Development Study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Self-Reported Violence at Year 2 (Logged)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gang membership</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family poverty level</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental supervision</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to school</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Regression coefficients, \( p<0.05 \)

An asterisk indicates that the rates for gang members are significantly higher than those for nonmembers in the highest quartile of association with delinquent peers (t-tests, \( p<0.05 \)). Nonmembers are divided into quartiles of association with delinquent peers.
Summary

Although research has consistently found that gang members are more involved in deviant and violent delinquent activities or commit more offenses than non-gang members, the effect of gang membership on delinquency is not as straightforward as the association might suggest. Longitudinal comparisons from the SSDP and the RYDS suggest that the rate of involvement in a variety of deviant behaviors over and above the impact of having delinquent peers. Indeed, gang membership significantly predicts delinquency, even when controlling for other predictors of both delinquency and gang membership.

The consistency and strength of these results suggest that the findings are robust. Although the RYDS and the SSDP provide strong and consistent evidence that gang membership on delinquent behavior. Even more impressive, however, is the consistency of the results across the two studies. The SSDP and the RYDS have been conducted in cities that differ in their histories and demographic characteristics. For example, the majority of SSDP respondents were African-American (68 percent), while most RYDS respondents were European-American (65 percent). The studies also used somewhat different measures and included somewhat different variables in the multivariate analyses. Yet both studies came to the same fundamental conclusion. The
The three longitudinal studies are prospective in nature; that is, subjects are repeatedly contacted to report on their current and recent violent activities. Deterioration of recall is minimized by avoiding lengthy gaps between interviews. Reporting periods were either 6 or 12 months, and all self-report violence data have been calculated for annual periods. Sample retention has been excellent: as of 1997, at least 84 percent of the subjects had been retained at each of the sites, and the average rate of retention across all interview periods was 90 percent.

Samples were carefully drawn to capture inner-city youth considered at high risk for involvement in delinquency and drug abuse. The samples can be described as probability samples, in which youth at greater risk are oversampled.

- Denver's sample includes 1,527 youth (806 boys and 721 girls) who were 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 years old when data collection commenced in 1988. This sample represents the general population of youth residing in 20,000 households in high-risk neighborhoods in Denver.

- Pittsburgh's sample consists of 1,517 boys who ranged in age from 7 to 13 years and attended grades 1, 4, and 7 when data collection began in 1987. This sample represents the general population of boys attending Pittsburgh's public schools.

- Rochester's sample of 1,000 youth (729 boys and 271 girls) was drawn from students attending grades 7 and 8. This sample represents the entire range of seventh and eighth grade students attending Rochester's public schools.

The Causes and Correlates program has contributed to an understanding of a variety of topics related to juvenile violence and delinquency, including developing and testing causal models for chronic violent offending; examining interrelationships among gang involvement, drug selling, and gun ownership/use; changes over time in delinquency and drug use; and neighborhood, individual, and social risk factors for serious juvenile offenders. Major findings from the three projects to date include the following:

- Delinquency, drug use, and other problem behaviors begin at earlier ages than previously thought. For many children, these behaviors are evident before the teenage years. The co-occurrence of problem behaviors is also quite common. Serious delinquents are likely to be involved in drug use, precocious sexual activity, school failure, juvenile gangs, gun ownership, and other related behaviors.

- There has been a shift in the demographic characteristics of adolescent violent offenders. Older males, children (as young as 10 years old), and females reported greater involvement in serious violence than would have been expected from previous research.

- The development of disruptive-and delinquent behavior in boys generally takes place in an orderly, progressive fashion, with less serious problem behaviors preceding more serious problems. Three distinct developmental pathways were identified: authority conflict (e.g., defiance and running away), covert actions (e.g., lying and stealing), and overt actions (e.g., aggression and violent behavior). Individuals may proceed along single or multiple developmental pathways toward serious antisocial behavior.

- Childhood maltreatment is associated with an increased risk of at least 2.5 percent for engaging in a host of adolescent problem behaviors: serious and violent delinquency, drug use, poor performance in school, mental illness, and teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, a history of maltreatment nearly doubles the risk that teenagers will experience multiple problems during adolescence.

Each project has disseminated the results of its research through a broad range of publications, reports, and presentations.

In 1997, OJJDP initiated the Youth Development Series, a series of Bulletins created to present findings from the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. To date, four Bulletins have been released: Epidemiology of Serious Violence, In the Wake of Childhood Maltreatment, Developmental Pathways in Boys' Disruptive and Delinquent Behavior, and Gang Members and Delinquent Behavior.

For more information on OJJDP's Causes and Correlates studies or to obtain copies of the Youth Development Series Bulletins or other Youth Gang Series Bulletins, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse by telephone at 800-638-8736; by mail at P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000; by e-mail at askncjrs@ncjrs.org; or by viewing OJJDP's home page.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The consistency of results and conclusions obtained in the two studies, which were conducted in two diverse communities, suggests that similar dynamics are likely to be operating in other areas. Given the recent spread of gangs to more and more cities across America (Thornberry, 1998), these findings underscore the importance of developing effective gang prevention and suppression programs.

- Gang membership has an independent contributing role in the etiology of delinquency and above other risk and protective factors. These findings point to the tremendous importance of street gangs in understanding the dynamics of delinquency, especially serious and violent delinquency. They also indicate that it may not be enough to intervene only with regard to risk factors in the family, school, and similar areas. Specific attention must be given...
Access dynamics of gangs and then in
delinquency prevention intervention.

While not every youth who joins gangs
will subsequently become involved in
delinquent or substance use,
delinquency and substance use are major factors in reducing delinquency
among youth. Therefore, programs should seek to prevent
youth from joining gangs.


The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Of-
lice of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this
document are those of the authors and do not
necessarily represent the official position or
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Justice.

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J. David Hawkins, Ph.D., is a professor of social work and the Director of the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington. His research focuses on understanding and preventing child and adolescent health and behavior problems. He is also committed to translating research into effective practice and policy to improve adolescent health and development. Since 1981, he has been conducting the Seattle Social Development Project, a longitudinal prevention study based on his theoretical work.

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References


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Related Readings

In addition to the Youth Gang Bulletin series, other gang-related publications, sponsored by OJJDP and other Office of Justice Programs agencies, are available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC). These publications include:

- Youth Gangs: An Overview. NCJ 167249.
- A Comprehensive Response to America's Youth Gang Problem (Fact Sheet). FS 009540.
- Gang Members and Delinquent Behavior (Bulletin). NCJ 165154.
- Prosecuting Gangs: A National Assessment (Research in Brief). NCJ 151785.
- Street Gangs and Drug Sales in Two Suburban Cities (Research in Brief). NCJ 151825.
- Urban Street Gang Enforcement (Monograph). NCJ 161845.
- Youth Gangs (Fact Sheet). FS 009772.

For copies of these publications, contact JJC at 800-638-8736 or send your request via e-mail to puborder@ncjrs.org. These documents are also available online. Visit the Publications section of OJJDP's Web site, www.ncjrs.org/ ojhome.htm.

OJJDP's National Youth Gang Center

As part of its comprehensive, coordinated response to America's gang problem, OJJDP funds the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). NYGC assists State and local jurisdictions in the collection, analysis, and exchange of information on gang-related demographics, legislation, literature, research, and promising program strategies. It also coordinates activities of the OJJDP Gang Consortium—a group of Federal agencies, gang program representatives, and service providers that works to coordinate gang information and programs. For more information contact:

National Youth Gang Center
P.O. Box 12729
Tallahassee, FL 32317
850-385-0600
Fax: 850-385-5356
E-Mail: nygc@irr.com
Internet: www.irr.com/nygc

Information newly available on the Web site includes gang-related legislation by subject and by State and the Youth Gang Consortium Survey of Gang Problems.

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