



## The lives of female gang members: A review of the literature



Tara E. Sutton

University of Georgia, Department of Sociology, 214A Baldwin Hall, 355 S. Jackson St., Athens, GA 30601, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Gangs  
Juvenile delinquency  
Offending  
Victimology  
Female crime

### ABSTRACT

Although female gang membership was overlooked for several years, recent work by feminist criminologists has provided a much more complex picture of female youth involved in gang life. This literature demonstrates that gender shapes the risk factors and consequences of gang involvement for female youth in several ways. In the current review, four main areas are discussed: 1) risk factors for female youths' gang involvement, 2) the extent and characteristics of female gang members' violence and crime, 3) the influence of gender on victimization experiences resulting from gang membership, and 4) female gang members' desistance from gang life. In each section, work specifically focusing on female gang members as well as work comparing the experiences of male and female gang members are presented. Finally, directions for future research are offered.

### 1. Introduction

For many years, researchers largely neglected to study female gang membership. Studies that were undertaken tended to focus on girls as sex objects or auxiliary members, and researchers assumed there were very few female gang members (Batchelor, 2009; Belknap & Bowers, 2016; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001; Peterson & Panfil, 2014). As reviewed by Curry (1998) and Moore and Hagedorn (2001), several seminal studies called into question the focus on male gang members and narratives of female members as on the fringes of gang life (Brown, 1977; Campbell, 1984a, 1984b; Miller, 1973; Quicker, 1983). Brown (1977) demonstrated that some African American female youth were integral to their gangs and were not just peripheral members. In another early study, Quicker (1983) found that, among Mexican American gangs in Los Angeles, female members had their own satellite groups that operated independently. Miller (1973) interviewed female youth in both auxiliary and independent female gangs. Alternatively, Campbell (1984a) found that women were subservient to male members across various roles, including the “sex object” and “tomboy.” These early studies provided a basis for understanding the complexity of female gang memberships and demonstrated the importance of studying female gang members directly. Further, this body of work supported the need to expand feminist theorizing about female youth in gangs and the need to recognize the various roles female gang members may play in gangs (Campbell, 1984a; Curry, 1998; Moore, 1991).

In recent years, work by feminist criminologists has continued to provide a multifaceted picture of female youth involved in gang life. This expanding concern with female gang members has resulted, in

part, from recent studies showing that most gangs are mixed-gendered and that girls and young women comprise as much as 30% of gang members (Curry, 1998; Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009; Miller & Brunson, 2000). Further, a recent report by the National Gang Intelligence Center (2013) shows that all-female gangs are on the rise in many areas and that female participation and status in gangs has escalated in recent years. Extant research demonstrates that female gang members exhibit a profile of risk across multiple domains, are involved in great delinquency and violence, and are at risk for victimization both within and outside of their gang.

Young men and women in gangs share many similarities in terms of precursors of membership and experiences within a gang (Belknap & Bowers, 2016; Peterson 2012; Peterson & Panfil, 2014). Female youths' experiences, however, are also shaped by gender in several ways (Peterson & Howell, 2013). For one, female gang members tend to be significantly younger than male members, typically joining in early adolescence (Bell, 2009; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). Female gang members are also less likely than male members to be involved in the most serious crimes, like gun fights, both by choice and because of rules put in place by male gang members (Brown, 1977; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2010; Miller & Brunson, 2000). Female gang members also face certain forms of victimization that are less common for male members, especially kidnapping and sexual assault or exploitation (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009; Miller, 1998; Miller & Brunson, 2000). Moreover, the sex composition of gangs is important in determining girls' and young women's experiences with criminal activity and victimization (Belknap & Bowers, 2016; Esbensen et al., 2010; Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001; St. Cyr & Decker, 2003). Finally, a small body of work demonstrates that gendered factors, particularly the experience

E-mail address: [tesutton@uga.edu](mailto:tesutton@uga.edu).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.10.001>

Received 20 December 2016; Received in revised form 28 August 2017; Accepted 9 October 2017

Available online 10 October 2017

1359-1789/© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

of pregnancy and motherhood, are salient in the process of gang desistance for female youth (Belknap & Bowers, 2016; Campbell, 1984a; Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Peterson & Panfil, 2014).

Thus, the current review focuses on four main areas: 1) risk factors for female youths' gang involvement, 2) the extent and characteristics of female gang members' violence and crime, 3) the influence of gender on victimization experiences resulting from gang membership, and 4) female gang members' desistance from gang life. In each section, work specifically focusing on female gang members as well as work comparing the experiences of male and female gang members are presented. As the research allows, the influence of a gang's sex composition (i.e. all-female, mixed-gender, or mostly male) on the criminal activity, violence, and victimization of gang members is also discussed. More general reviews of gang membership can be found elsewhere (see Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013 for a recent review).

## 2. Risk factors for joining a gang among female youth

There is much evidence that female youth who join gangs face an array of adversities and vulnerabilities (Fleisher, 1998; Moore, 1991). The extent of the hardships they experience makes gang membership an attractive option for fulfilling both practical and emotional needs. Further, many gang members have few barriers to prevent involvement and have close bonds to existing gang members, making membership an attractive option. Findings on precipitating factors of gang membership among female youth can be classified into four predominant theoretical traditions: 1) the socio-ecological perspective, 2) social learning theory, 3) social control theory, and 4) feminist theory.

According to the socio-ecological perspective, researchers must examine the influence and interaction of multiple social systems, including individual, family, peer, school, and community, when determining risk and protective factors for gang involvement (Esbensen et al., 2010; Merrin, Hong, & Espelage, 2015). A socio-ecological approach necessitates that these different systems be considered simultaneously. Work in this area demonstrates that female youth face vulnerabilities in each of these domains, and they also perceive psychological benefits that lead to gang membership. Further, research show that the more risks a female youth encounters across these domains, the more likely she is to join a gang (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Miller, 2002b).

Within the individual context, existing literature shows that girls mention gaining a sense of power and respect from others, feeling important, and having others fear them as reasons to join gangs (Molidor, 1996; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Practical concerns also motivate young women to join, including the ability to make money and a need for protection (often provided by male members), emotional support, and a sense of safety from violent homes and neighborhoods (Hunt, Mackenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2000; Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 1997; Miller, 1998; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Individual-level risk factors include mental health issues, low self-esteem, feelings of isolation, risky sexual activity, and substance use (Allen, 2013; Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999; Voisin, King, Diclemente, & Carry, 2014). A family environment characterized by disadvantage, family dysfunction, conflict, a lack of parental involvement and availability, parental history of arrest, and substance abuse are also established risk factors for female youth's gang membership (Bell, 2009; Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Hill et al., 1999; Merrin et al., 2015; Miller, 2002b; Valdez, 2007; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2003). In the peer domain, peer delinquency and violence as well as peer pressure and rejection have been linked to the decision to join a gang among female youth (Bell, 2009; Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Dishion, Nelson, & Yasui, 2005; Esbensen et al., 2010; Hill et al., 1999; Lenzi et al., 2015; Merrin et al., 2015; Wang, 2000). Other reasons cited by young women in the peer context include a sense of belonging, solidarity with individuals who experience similar adversities, and supportive friendships (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Walker-Barnes & Mason,

2001; Wang, 2000).

The school context is included less often in research that takes a socio-ecological approach to female gang involvement (Esbensen et al., 2010; Lenzi et al., 2015). However, there is evidence that low school expectation and aspirations and a lack of school safety confer risk for young women's gang involvement (Bell, 2009; Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 2010; Hill et al., 1999). Research further demonstrates that neighborhood crime and violence, disorder (e.g. abandoned homes, broken windows), poverty, and racial segregation increase the risk of young women's gang involvement (Bell, 2009; Miller, 2002b; Miller & Decker, 2001; Voisin et al., 2014; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). The violence and crime female youth are exposed to in their neighborhoods may be a more salient reason to join a gang than poverty. For instance, girls rated living in a high crime area and the presence of gangs as more important in the decision to join a gang than poverty and disorder (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Consistent with this idea, some studies have shown that social disorganization and disorder and neighborhood poverty are unrelated to female gang membership (Bell, 2009; Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993).

Other findings on young women's gang membership support a social learning theory argument. Exposure to gang lifestyles via family and friends and attitudes that support and value gang life are related to the likelihood of female youths' gang membership (Akers, 1973). Girls at risk for gang involvement often have many friends in a gang and mention feeling they would lose important friends if they did not join (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Esbensen et al., 1999; Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Further, gang-involved young women tend to have several family members entrenched in gang life (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Hunt et al., 2000; Merrin et al., 2015; Miller, 2002b). In one study, 71% of gang-involved young women had siblings or multiple family members in gangs compared to 1/3 of non-gang members (Miller, 2002b).

Qualitative research supports these findings; as discussed by Hunt et al. (2000), for female gang members, "growing up in the family was the same as growing up in the gang" (p. 21). In this study, almost all (96%) female youth had at least one family member, usually a cousin, brother, or sister, who was a current or former gang member. These female youth are likely encouraged to join by family members and friends or witness the benefits of gang membership through their close relationships. Over time, female youth who are exposed to a gang lifestyle internalize norms and attitudes that are further conducive to their involvement in gangs. Even if these girls do not have relatives in gangs, it is likely their family members still espouse deviant values (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Ness, 2010). For instance, Ness (2010) observed that girls living in low-income, urban areas were socialized by parents, especially mothers, to value violence and to engage in fights with female peers. In fact, girls faced harsh punishment at home for avoiding fights and risking their respectability. Other studies support that female gang members are more likely to reject conventional norms, feel less guilt about committing delinquent acts, and have fewer pro-social friends compared to non-members (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Hill et al., 1999).

Next, social control theory proposes that conventional social bonds, a sense of social support, and safety in neighborhoods and schools should protect youth from delinquency (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Hirschi, 1969). Support for these propositions in relation to female gang membership has been inconsistent. Researchers have reported that maternal and paternal attachment, religious attendance, and social isolation are unrelated to young women's gang membership (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Hill et al., 1999). These studies, however, have also reported that neighborhood and school safety, supportive neighborhood adults, and parental attachment decrease the likelihood that young women join gangs while low school attachment and commitment and low neighborhood attachment increase the likelihood (Bell, 2009; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Lenzi et al., 2015). The inconsistent support for

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4760046>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4760046>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)