Journal of Criminal Justice 57 (2018) 11–25

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Criminal Justice

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jcrimjus

Gangs, gender, and involvement in crime, victimization, and exposure to violence

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1. Introduction

Research on female gang membership has become more common in recent decades, leading Miller (2002, p. 175) to conclude that "it is no longer accurate to say that female involvement in youth gangs is an understudied phenomenon." Research suggests females represent a sizeable share of self-reported gang members, especially among school-aged youth, and that the frequency and nature of self-reported delinquency among female members suggests something more than simply marginal involvement in gangs (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). These findings offer evidence of less "male dominance" in the gang than what has traditionally been assumed (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Howell, 2007), but even contemporary research suggests the membership experience is not the same for males and females (Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009). For instance, the literature mentions a strong sexual double standard in the gang, where male members can be sexually active without open scorn or ridicule, whereas female members are likely to experience condemnation from both male and female members for the same sexual behaviors (Campbell, 1991; Miller, 2002; Moore, 1991).

The gang literature also addresses differences between male and female members' involvement in violence. Violence is considered a central feature of gangs (Decker, 1996), but ethnographic research suggests violence is a more central feature of gang membership among males (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). Some have suggested female members are "structurally excluded" from inter-gang violence by male members (Bowker, Gross, & Klein, 1980), while others suggest female members exclude themselves from inter-gang disputes (Miller, 1998).

Empirical research has addressed whether the effect of gang membership is moderated by gender, but most of this research has used cross-sectional data, generating findings that show "that, in general, girls in gangs commit far fewer offenses than boys in gangs, and that this gender gap is most pronounced for violent crimes" (Belknap & Bowers, 2016, p. 217). The suggestion is this "gender gap" is attributable to dynamics "in" the gang (i.e., differential facilitation), but this gender gap could simply reflect male and female differences in criminal offending that existed prior to gang involvement (i.e., differential selection), given cross-sectional studies often lack pre-gang measures of these behaviors (see Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). This study, in contrast, uses two waves of data from a national sample of adolescents ($N = 13{,}097$) to address whether the effect of gang membership on criminal offending, victimization, and exposure to violence is moderated by gender. These two waves of panel data include measures of these outcomes both prior to and during gang membership. The availability of pre-gang controls in these data, along with our use of a potential outcomes framework, allows us to more rigorously assess whether gang membership is generally *less criminogenic* for females.

2. Literature review

2.1. Extent of female gang membership

Studies that use administrative or survey data from the police (e.g., arrest records), or self-report data from arrested or detained persons, typically indicate that females represent < 15% of gang members (e.g., National Gang Center, 2016; Chesney-Lind, Rockhill, Marker, & Reyes, 1994; Klein, 2009). Studies that use self-report data from community- or school-based samples composed mostly or entirely of adolescents, however, often produce estimates of female membership that exceed 15%. These studies include Esbensen and Huizinga's (1993) research in Denver, Hill, Howell, Hawkins, and Battin-Pearson's (1999) research in Seattle, Curry, Decker, and Egley (2002) research in St. Louis, and Thornberry et al.'s (2003) research in Rochester. These single-city studies found that females represented roughly one-fifth to one-third of self-reported gang members. Some studies with school-aged youth from multiple cities or jurisdictions have indicated that females make up more than one-third of self-reported gang members. These studies include data gathered as part of the first (35% of gang members were female) and second (41% of gang members were female) evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. curriculum (Peterson, 2012), as well as Estrada, Gilreath, Astor, and Benbenishty (2016) study on gang membership among > 500,000 students in California (40% of gang members were female). Comparable but lower estimates were also found with self-report data from national samples. The percentage of gang members who were

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2018.02.005
Received 12 January 2018; Received in revised form 25 February 2018; Accepted 25 February 2018

female ranged from 25% to 35% in a national school-based (cross-sectional) sample of students in grades 6 to 12 (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001, p. 36), in the NLSY97 national community-based (panel) sample of youth initially ages 12 to 16 (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015, p. 416), and in the Add Health national school-based sample of adolescents initially in grades 7 to 12 (Bell, 2009).

Self-report findings from school-aged youth, therefore, consistently indicate that females make up a sizable share of gang members, a conclusion less supported by administrative or self-report data from the police or system-involved youth or adults (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2010; Hunt G. & Joe-Laidler, 2001). Most of the self-report estimates mentioned above came from longitudinal studies that initially surveyed school-aged youth as young as 10 and then again at later waves, providing an opportunity to identify the duration of gang membership among these youth. On average, gang involvement peaks at a young age (prior to 16) and is short-lived (often no more than one or two years), especially for female members (Chesney-Lind, 2013; Howell & Griffiths, 2016; Panfil & Peterson, 2015; Pyrooz, 2014). This finding suggests that by the time gang members come to the attention of the police or are surveyed in detention, when these members are typically an older adolescent or young adult, most one-time gang involved youth have already concluded membership, particularly in the case of female members (see Klein & Maxson, 2006). This is why self-report data from younger adolescents have been so instrumental in advancing research on female membership, because these data are collected at ages when females are more likely to be gang involved.

2.2. Female membership and violence

Self-report estimates of the extent of female membership underscore the importance of understanding the effects of gang involvement among females. Female gang membership has been acknowledged since the onset of gang research (see Franzese, Convey, & Mernard, 2016), but prior to the 1970s or 1980s female membership was sparingly addressed, if at all. When female involvement in gangs was discussed in early gang studies, this discussion often originated from male gang members' perspectives on females (Campbell, 1991; Curry, 1998; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). These accounts generally "minimized the role and motivations of girl gang members" (Joe Laidler & Hunt, 2001, p. 657), by reducing female involvement in gangs to subordinate behaviors that served the interests of male members, particularly as sexual partners, as lookouts, as gun or drug carriers, or as traps used to lure rival gang members (Curry, 1998; Panfil & Peterson, 2015; Peterson, 2012). These behaviors were not considered by male members or scholars as especially integral to the gang, and the nature of these behaviors suggested female members were largely beholden to male members.

Beginning in 1970s and 1980s, however, research on female gang members by scholars such as Brown (1977), Quicker (1983), and Campbell (1991) began to dispel the "toys for boys" take on female involvement in gangs. Studies (e.g., Fleisher, 1998) began to make evident that female members' activities in the gang, such as criminal offending, could be as varied and as central to the gang as those of males (Hagedorn & Devitt, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Even contemporary research, however, suggests the gang is not a place where females are likely to experience "gender equality" or "liberation" (Curry, 1998; Miller, 2001; Portillos, 1999).

Violence is one behavior not immune from gendered expectations or dynamics in the gang. Ethnographic research, in particular, suggests that the frequency and nature of violence among gang members is moderated by gender (Gover et al., 2009), especially in mixed-gender gangs. As Carr and Alfieri (2006, p. 83) put it, "violence is not as normative for women in gangs as it is for men." There is simply less pressure for female members to take a regular part in violence (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). For instance, females in Miller's (1998, 2001) study suggested males did not expect them to commit violence regularly, especially violence that involved the use of weapons or firearms (see also Miller & Brunson, 2000; Miller & Decker, 2001).

These gendered expectations have a way of "structurally" excluding female members from inter-gang disputes (Bowker et al., 1980), which can serve as particularly visible and status-conferring events in the gang (Miller, 2001). Female exclusion from situations of inter-gang conflict can occur because of the attitudes or directives of male members or because of a decision on the part of female members not to participate. Male members may view female members as unreliable during physical altercations, may feel some responsibility to protect females from adversaries, or may believe that female participation in inter-gang disputes undermines the legitimacy of the gang (Miller & Brunson, 2000; Portillos, 1999; Vigil, 2002). Miller's (1998, 2001) research, in particular, also noted the greater possibility of avoiding violent behavior among female gang members, especially when they considered the activities too dangerous or troubling to become involved in voluntarily.

Even if female members are not structurally excluded from gang violence or elect to participate, research suggests these behaviors are more likely to be devalued or dismissed in the gang when females participate. In particular, females in mixed-gender gangs can encounter a highly patriarchal environment that minimizes their contributions to the gang (see Moore, 1991; Portillos, 1999; Vigil, 2002). This environment may provide less incentive for females to commit violence as a way to build status in the gang, given these risky behaviors may go unacknowledged by male members who often occupy leadership positions. These dynamics, including gendered expectations about the use of violence, structural and personal exclusion from potentially harmful situations, and a general dismissiveness of female contributions to the group, form a gang environment that tends to suppress female involvement in violence in a way it does not for males (Portillos, 1999). This body of work drives our first hypothesis to be tested in this research:

H1. The effect of gang involvement on criminal behavior will be less pronounced for females, especially for more serious violence.

2.3. Female membership and victimization

Research regularly finds a relationship between criminal offending and victimization (e.g., Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991), and this relationship may be stronger among gang members (Pyrooz, Moule, & Decker, 2014; see also Fox, 2013; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007). This suggests that gang involvement also has a less pronounced effect on victimization among females, given female gang members are generally less involved in serious criminal behavior (Miller & Brunson, 2000). Regardless of a member's criminal involvement, however, the company of gang peers can make otherwise benign social encounters adversarial (e.g., run-ins with rival members), and can also result in more time spent in unstructured situations (e.g., partying) conducive to violence (Taylor, Feng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008).

The prominent role of unstructured socializing in the gang may be especially relevant for understanding victimization among female members. As mentioned, females in mixed-gender gangs can be structurally excluded by males from inter-gang disputes that increase the risk of victimization. However, most daily activities among gang members do not involve such inter-gang encounters. Instead, members' time is generally spent socializing and hanging out with gang peers (Klein, 1995). It is during these routine interactions that females face certain victimization risks by males in their own gang. Victimization among female gang members, therefore, may be driven more by known threats inside the gang than unknown threats outside the gang (Miller, 1998; Miller, 2002). These internal threats include unwanted sexual advances or behaviors by male members (Joe Laidler & Hunt, 1997), as well as verbal or physical confrontations that spontaneously evolve from female members intentionally or unintentionally challenging male members who believe they "run it all" (Miller & Decker, 2001). Like