



Precocious transitions and long-term heroin use outcomes: A longitudinal study of gang-affiliated Mexican-American males



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Precocious transitions are linked to substance abuse and other risks.
- 15-year follow-up study of gang-affiliated Mexican-American men was conducted.
- Early-nest leaving and teenage parenthood are protective factors for heroin use.
- Dropping out of high school and cohabiting are risk factors for heroin use.

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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study (15 years) investigates heroin use patterns following precocious transition experiences for gang-affiliated Mexican-American males ($n = 119$) in San Antonio, Texas. Five precocious transitions are examined: cohabitation, early nest leaving, school dropout, teenage parenthood, and unemployment (while not in school). Half of these men used heroin over the follow-up period for an average of under 4 years. Findings from a zero-inflated Poisson model indicate that while these transitions do not have a significant effect on initiation of heroin use, they do have an important influence on individual's drug trajectories once they have initiated. Early-nest leaving and teenage parenthood are protective factors for continued heroin use while dropping out of high school and cohabiting during this same period are risk factors. Findings are discussed within the context of these disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

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1. Introduction

Dynamic life course processes are important for understanding crime and drug use trajectories (Sampson & Laub, 2008; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Research has found that transitions and turning points in the life course contribute to the onset, stability, and change in these trajectories over time (Elder, 1998). The transition to adulthood from adolescence occurs in relatively age-graded stages in which an individual moves from one stage to another in an orderly trajectory (Caspi, Elder, & Herbener, 1990). It is when transitions occur out of order that crime and drug use behaviors are more likely to result (Newcomb & Bentler, 1988). Precocious transitions are defined by early entry in adult roles such as early cohabitation, marriage, parenthood, and dropping out of school. A “rush to adulthood” creates a chronically stressful situation that places excessive demands (emotionally, socially, and financially) on adolescents that are ill-equipped for adult responsibilities (Wickrama, Conger, Wallace, & Elder, 2003; Wickrama, Merten, &

Elder, 2005; Wickrama, Wickrama, & Baltimore, 2010). In other words, precocious transitions may force individuals into adult roles at an earlier age than they may be developmentally prepared, leading to a variety of adverse outcomes (Krohn, Lizotte, & Perez, 1997; Newcomb, 1996).

Precocious transitions have been linked to substance abuse (Carbone-Lopez & Miller, 2012; Krohn et al., 1997; Staff, Schulenberg, & Bachman, 2010), risky sexual behaviors (Bozick, 2006), and other adverse health outcomes (Wickrama et al., 2005; Wickrama et al., 2010). For example, Staff et al. (2010) found that alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine use significantly increased as adolescents transitioned out of their parents' home. This association remained strong when school and employment statuses were controlled. Precocious transitions have been characterized as contributing to the onset of deviant behavior and as a developmental consequence of early participation in deviance. For example, Haynie, Petts, Maimon, and Piquero (2009) examine whether exposure to direct and indirect violence during adolescence is associated with precocious role exits such as running away from home, dropping out of high school, having a child, attempting suicide, and criminal justice involvement. On the other hand, Carbone-Lopez and Miller (2012) examined the cumulative

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impact of early transitions into adult roles and the onset of methamphetamine use in a sample of women.

Precocious transitions have been found to be especially salient in the life course of adolescents involved in delinquent peer groups. Precocious transitions and associated behaviors limit the adolescent's contact with conventional peers, reducing engagement in other prosocial behaviors and encourages gang involvement and delinquent activity (Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011). Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith and Tobin (2003) examined adolescent gang members and identified five adolescent precocious transitions common for this group: school dropout, teenage parenthood, early-nest leaving, unemployment (for those not in school), and cohabitation. Following Thornberry's work, Valdez, Kaplan, Cepeda, and Mata (2005) found in a sample of Mexican-American adolescent gang members a positive and significant association between total precocious transitions and hard drug use. Unemployment, school dropout, and early-nest leaving were found to be significant risk factors that increased alcohol and illicit drug use during adolescence.

This article builds upon this previous work to examine the impact of precocious transitions on the onset of and continuation of heroin use into adulthood among a sample of young adult criminogenic Mexican-American men with histories of adolescent gang membership. This topic is significant for three reasons. First, heroin use has consistently been a major social and health problem among Mexican Americans and other Latinos (Valdez, 2005; Valdez & Kaplan, 2007; Valdez, Neaigus, Kaplan, & Cepeda, 2011). Research from treatment admissions shows that Latinos receiving substance abuse treatment are more likely to be treated for heroin use and referred to treatment by the criminal justice system than other ethnic groups (Reif, Horgan, & Ritter, 2008). Related, in the United States there has been a surge in heroin use and overdoses across the general population that has spurred public health concern. Second, the men in this study were recruited from disadvantaged urban neighborhoods that are reflective of Mexican communities across the southwest (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2003; Valdez & Cepeda, 2008). Research documents that living in a disadvantaged community is associated with an increased risk of precocious transitions as the environment confounds substance use and associated mental health symptoms (Wickrama et al., 2005). Third, gangs continue to be a major social issue in the United States, especially among Latino adolescents, with an estimated 760,000 active gang members (Egley & Ritz, 2006) and an 8% cumulative prevalence of gang membership (Pyrooz, 2014). Criminal justice data suggest that Hispanics may also have a longer duration of gang membership (Egley, Howell, & Major, 2006; Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013). Despite this, there is a paucity of research documenting the long-term consequences of gang membership (Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013). It is the objective of this study to fill these gaps in knowledge by determining the impact of adolescent precocious transitions on long-term heroin use outcomes for gang-involved Mexican-American men.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and sampling

A longitudinal study was used to investigate heroin use patterns following precocious transition experiences in gang-affiliated Mexican-American males in San Antonio, Texas. This area is characterized by a high concentration of poverty, adult criminals, drug trafficking, delinquent behavior, and Mexican-American street gangs. The original study, conducted from 1996 to 1998, surveyed 151 Mexican-American males. A multi-stage stratified design was applied to select a random sample of individuals that were representative of 404 known Mexican-American gang members in this specific urban geographic area. Rosters of gang members were developed through ethnographic methods so that the study did not rely on school or police based samples or rosters. Structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews were

used to collect information about role transitions and gang-related crime and violence. A detailed description of the sampling design has been presented in earlier articles (Peterson & Valdez, 2005; Yin, Valdez, Mata, & Kaplan, 1996).

The follow-up study, conducted from 2009 to 2012, relocated 94.7% of men from the original sample. Of those relocated, 83.2% were successfully enrolled for a final follow-up rate of 78.8% ($n = 119$). Sixteen men refused to participate in the follow-up study, 6 men were deceased, and 2 men were in federal prison. Subjects in Bexar County Jail or Texas Department of Criminal Justice were successfully enrolled in the study. Using an adapted version of the Natural History Interview (NHI) technique (Hser, Hoffman, Grella, & Anglin, 2001; Hser, Huang, Chou, & Anglin, 2007), in-depth interviews were conducted and questionnaires were utilized to retrospectively collect substance use data from the initial interview to the current interview. Patterns of drug use, including heroin use, were documented.

Both studies were funded by the National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse and study protocols were approved by university Institutional Review Boards and Executive Services at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

2.2. Study participants

The original study sample consisted of 161 male Mexican-American gang members ranging in age from 14 to 20 years with a mean age of 18.5 years old. The 119 men sampled at follow-up had an average age of 31. Approximately 35% of the follow-up sample earned a GED and 43% were employed full or part-time at the time of the follow-up interview. Fifty-three percent of the men were married or living with a stable partner, while 28% had never been married. Of the follow-up sample, 85% of the men had at least one child with 69% reporting at least some responsibility to support them. Seventy-eight percent of the men had been convicted of at least one felony. All of the men were U.S. born Mexican-origin with many having two U.S. born parents.

2.3. Study variables

The focus of the analysis is on heroin use following precocious transitions experienced in adolescence by Mexican-American male gang members. Five binary precocious transitions are examined (Thornberry & Burch, 1997; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003; Valdez et al., 2005) from the initial interview: cohabitation, early nest leaving, school dropout, teenage parenthood, and unemployment. Cohabitation is determined by whether the respondent was living with a spouse, common law partner or girlfriend at the time of the interview. Respondents were coded as leaving the nest early if they had involuntarily left their guardian's home or had run away. School dropout was coded if the respondent reported dropping out of school regardless if they acquired their GED or high school equivalency later. Unemployment indicated that the respondent was not in school and unemployed at the time of the original interview. If they were currently attending school, they were coded as employed. Respondents were considered teen parents if the child was born prior to the respondent's 20th birthday. These items were collected during the initial phase of the study in 1996 to 1998. A precocious transitions index was created by summing the five variables.

The outcome variable is the total number of months of heroin use during the follow-up period (1996–1998 to 2009–2012). Heroin use includes injecting use, intranasal use, and other forms of use. This variable was assessed using the NHI reporting technique. The study adapted the NHI methodology developed by the UCLA Center for Advancing Longitudinal Drug Abuse Research. The NHI techniques have been successfully used to generate reliable retrospective measurements in long term drug abuse follow-up studies (Hser, Huang, Chou, & Anglin, 2007; Hser, Longshore, & Anglin, 2007). The assessment consisted of a form designed to collect data on the time dependent dynamics of events

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