



Escape from violence: What reduces the enduring consequences of adolescent gang affiliation? ☆



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Adolescent gang affiliation has long-term, cascading effects across the life course, ruining life chances in multiple domains and leading to sustained involvement in crime and violence. Yet, limited empirical attention has been devoted to exploring what factors may buffer the risk of adolescent gang affiliation on violent behavior in adulthood. The current study examines whether perceived social support during emerging adulthood moderates the relationship between adolescent gang affiliation trajectories and violence in adulthood.

Methods: Using data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, we estimated developmental trajectories of adolescent gang affiliation. These trajectory groups were then linked to later violence through Poisson regression models, establishing the relationship between adolescent gang affiliation, protective factors during emerging adulthood, and violence in established adulthood.

Results: Having a committed partner relatively early in life protects individuals in the early-adolescence gang affiliation trajectory from sustained violence, and perception of consistent support from a parent figure protects individuals in the late-adolescence gang affiliation trajectory from violence in adulthood.

Conclusions: Perception of social support from a partner or parent figure can be critical in reducing the enduring consequences of gang affiliation. It is also important to recognize developmental heterogeneity among gang youths when intervening and providing support.

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1. Introduction

There is a considerable body of literature linking adolescent gang affiliation to both immediate and long-term negative developmental outcomes across a variety of life domains. Gangs function as a crime-facilitating context (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993), and the link between gang membership and delinquency, especially serious and violent offending, holds across time, place, demographic subgroups, data sources and definitions of gangs and gang membership (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). The link also holds up when gang members were compared with non-gang youth surrounded by highly delinquent friends (Battin, Hill,

Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Huizinga, 1996; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). Importantly, the unique effects of gang membership are not confined to periods of active gang involvement (Melde & Esbensen, 2011, 2014). Individuals with a history of gang affiliation are more likely to experience precocious transitions, have lower educational achievement, endure unemployment, suffer economic hardship and family problems in adulthood, and engage in sustained delinquency and exhibit an increased probability of arrest (Augustyn, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2014; Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2001a, 2001b; Pyrooz, 2014; Thornberry et al., 2003).

Despite evidence of the enduring consequences of gang affiliation, prior research has also suggested that not every gang youth experienced the negative consequences mentioned above (Moore, 1991; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). Surprisingly, there is little research on what reduces the long-term, negative impact of adolescent gang affiliation. We consider this an important question from both a theoretical and policy-making standpoint. Existing research on gang desistance has shown that declaring oneself a “former” gang member is not functionally the same thing as having no contacts with former gang associates (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Maintaining *persisting* social and emotional ties to a gang leads to perpetration and victimization after desistance (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). It is therefore theoretically meaningful to comprehend what factors may

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buffer the continuing risk associated with gang joining on later offending. This is especially important when we recognize that gang membership is a relatively temporary phenomenon among a majority of youth who participate in a gang (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). Using a nationally representative sample of youth, Pyrooz and Sweeten (2015) recently estimated that approximately 401,000 juveniles join gangs and 378,000 exit gangs annually in the United States, with a turnover rate of 36%. Although primary (and secondary) prevention remains the cornerstone of efforts to reduce the burden of violence and other gang-related problems (Simon, Ritter, & Mahendra, 2013), the sheer number of ex-gang members calls for attention to tertiary prevention strategies that may alleviate the social and economic losses related to ex-gang members' sustained criminal involvement.

Against this background, the current study sets out to explore what factors moderate the relationship between adolescent gang affiliation and violence in established adulthood. To answer this question, we go beyond prior research in at least two ways. First, we take into account developmental heterogeneity in gang membership. Although gang scholars have called for a move beyond the dichotomy of “gang member” versus “non-gang member” and recognize the existence of developmental differences in gang affiliation (Maxson, 2013; Pyrooz, 2013), existing research has scarcely examined how distinct trajectories of gang affiliation may differentially affect long-term consequences of joining a gang. Second, we integrate Cullen's (1994) social support theory to examine possible insulators from the snares of gang affiliation (Moffitt, 1993). Past research has repeatedly shown that the failure of securing support from conventional sources is one of the most important reasons for gang involvement (Sharkey, Stifel, & Mayworm, 2015). It follows that social support may also deflect the effects of gang membership on later violence. We thus test Cullen's propositions regarding social support and its protective effects against being a juvenile gang member.

2. Adolescent gang affiliation and long-term consequences

Previous research has conceptualized adolescent gang affiliation as an “acute” turning point that may redirect normative trajectories in many life domains (Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Sampson & Laub, 2005). From a life-course perspective, attitudes and behaviors initiated during adolescence can have important consequences for successful transitions into adult roles and responsibilities (Elder, 1998). Specifically, gang researchers have documented the theoretical mechanisms that associate adolescent gang affiliation with subsequent life adversities. First, gang membership exerts *criminogenic* influences on individuals. Adolescent gang affiliation corresponds with increases in both law-violating behaviors and violent victimization, which in turn leads to tangible (e.g. arrest, gang enhancement penalties or incarceration) and intangible (e.g. labeling and stigmatization) consequences. Evidence has also shown that gang participation leads to long-lasting physical and mental health problems (Gilman, Hill, & Hawkins, 2014; Wood, Foy, Layne, Pynoos, & James, 2002).

Second, joining a gang sets adolescents apart from conventional society. Previous work has characterized the youth gang as a surrogate family (Vigil, 1988), a collective response to adverse social conditions (Hagedorn, 1998) and a group response to perceived threats (Klein, 1971; Moore, 1991). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) also reported that “involvement in legitimate social institutions or with non-gang peers and relatives drops dramatically following gang initiation” (p. 187). Youth gangs have become the primary social network and reference group for gang members. Supervision and monitoring as well as bonding to conventional society are largely cut off. Meanwhile, gang involvement signifies a commitment to an alternative cultural orientation. Denied legitimate means to status, respect and acceptance pushes gang youth toward “focal concerns of lower class culture” such as toughness, smartness, autonomy or fate (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958). Gang experiences and orientation thus

inhibit the acquisition of human and social capital from conventional social institutions (e.g. family, school or legitimate labor market) that is essential for later life success (Dong, Gibson, & Krohn, 2015; Krohn et al., 2011).

Third and relatedly, gang affiliation leads to unstructured routine activities and deviant life styles. Gang joining exposes individuals to a street-oriented life style—spending days and nights out on the streets with fellow members, drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana or hustling for drug sales. Taylor and colleagues (Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007) found that gang members are more likely than other youth to engage in unsupervised activities with peers and to hang out where drugs and/or alcohol are available. Such delinquent lifestyles and routine activities mediate the gang membership-serious violent victimization link. When life difficulties arise, ex-gang members often feel the temptation to return to their gang friends (and old life styles) for material and emotional support (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009).

Finally, gang membership contributes to the formation of deviant self-concept and “anger identity” (Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007). Youth gangs develop “group esteem” in place of self-esteem, and in-group solidarity and intergroup conflict build upon and reinforce each other through self-sustaining cycles (Klein & Maxson, 2006). The collective norms of youth gangs support and expect aggressive action when derogation of “collective honor” occurs, and individuals that identify with the gang are expected to quickly resort to violence above levels motivated by individual proclivities (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012; Papachristos, 2009). In addition, the development of “oppositional culture” and viewing oneself as a victim of oppression or the unfair target of racism and inequality further mobilizes techniques of neutralization among gang youth (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Moore & Vigil, 1989).

Both ethnographic and quantitative empirical research suggest evidence for long-term negative life outcomes years after active gang participation. Sánchez-Jankowski (1991), p. 61–62) discussed several possible outcomes of gang affiliation. Former gang members could 1) pursue various illegal economic activities on their own; 2) move on to another type of criminal organization or association, such as smaller groups like “crews” or branches of organized crime; 3) be incarcerated for a considerable part of their lives and perhaps involve themselves in the prison gangs; 4) die from drug overdose, violent confrontation or the risks of lower-class life or 5) pursue legitimate employment and maintain an ordinary lifestyle they avoided in the past. Moore (1991) identified three types of adult outcomes for ex-gang members: “squares”, accounting for approximately 40% of the sample, were employed as young adults and lived a conventional family life, whereas “tecatos” (heroin addicts) and “cholos” (the undereducated and unemployed) accounted for one-quarter and one-third of the sample respectively. For the latter two categories, the gang remained the first place they turned to when encountering life difficulties. Hagedorn (1998) found that only a third of male gang members in his study had a high school diploma and about the same number were employed. The rate for high school graduation was equally low for female gang members. Nearly 9 of 10 female gang members were mothers by their early 20s, with about 60% on welfare.

While ethnographic studies have presented us with detailed descriptions of ex-gang members' lives, quantitative studies with a longitudinal design better control for confounding factors that might lead to adulthood adversity such as self-selection mechanisms, memory recall, or other unobserved factors rather than gang affiliation itself. Levitt and Venkatesh (2001a, 2001b) found that once background characteristics such as GPA and family environment were controlled, earlier gang affiliation remained positively associated with ever having been incarcerated, number of times shot, and annual illegal income, and negatively associated with annual legal income.

The Rochester Youth Development Study provided some of the most important findings regarding the long-term consequences of gang membership. Thornberry et al. (2003) found that male gang members

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