



Inter-partner violence in the context of gangs: A review

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ABSTRACT

Gang youth are a concern to society because they are often associated with crime and acts of violence and are particularly at-risk for involvement in sexual victimization, relationship abuse, and inter-partner violence (IPV). The current study reviews the nature of the association between gang involvement and IPV. The study summarizes what is currently known about IPV and gangs, reviews risk factors that are connected to both gang membership and relationship violence, the manifestation of relationship abuse and violence among those affiliated or associate with gangs, and how factors such as gender roles and the social structure of gangs play a role in IPV risk. Eighteen articles met the criteria for the current study and are described in this review. Implications for the additive risk associated with gang involvement are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Gang youth are a concern to society because they are often associated with crime and acts of violence. Affiliation with, and involvement in criminal gangs has been identified as a threat to the health, safety, and security of not only the individuals involved, but the greater community as a whole (Cepeda & Valdez, 2003; Cooper, Anaf, & Bowden, 2006). Psychology and Criminal Justice researchers are

becoming increasingly interested in understanding the effects of gang involvement at the personal, peer, family, and community levels. Some researchers have uncovered strong associations between gang activity and negative health and behavioral outcomes such as delinquency, criminal offending, gun use, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (Cepeda & Valdez, 2003; Miller & Decker, 2001). In fact, much research points to a disproportional association with negative, risky behaviors among gang youth compared with their non-gang peers (Sanders, Schneiderman, Loken, Lankenau, & Bloom, 2009). It is, therefore, not surprising that gang youth are particularly at-risk for involvement in sexual victimization, relationship abuse, and inter-partner violence (IPV). The aim of the current study is to review

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the nature of the association between gang involvement (membership, association, or affiliation) and IPV. This study is unique in that it focuses on the relationship between gang involvement and an individual's tendency to engage (either as a victim or perpetrator) in dating and relationship violence. This paper is a composite review of previous studies focused on the relationship behaviors of gang members and their affiliates, outlining central themes of IPV involvement within these unique organized communities.

The expansion of organized crime and gang affiliations within the past 30 years has been overwhelming (Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009; Miller, 2001). Gangs have been made notorious for committing violent crime, fueling drug trafficking, capitalizing on their power, and force within the public, and so on. Researchers are now shifting to a more individualized focus of gang behaviors and their effects. At the individual level, gang members and their partners are at a significantly increased risk for both violent victimization and dating violence behaviors (Schalet, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2003). This potentially opens the door for serious health concerns such as STI's, mental illness and substance abuse. Cepeda and Valdez (2003) highlight the strong relationship between gang affiliation and substance abuse, establishing that even girls outside of the gang who interact with members are put at higher risk for these behaviors. Research has shown that individuals involved in regular delinquent activity (i.e., gangs), are more susceptible to these threats as they tend to adapt more risk taking behaviors (Knox & Tromanhauser, 1999). These increased health threats have further peaked researchers' interest in these at risk groups.

1.1. Intimate-partner violence risk

There are risk factors that are connected to both gang membership and relationship violence. Research has suggested that gangs often contain members who are already at a higher risk for dating and relationship violence. These may include individuals with single parent homes, high levels of acceptance of violence, low levels of positive peer norms, and child sexual abuse. As was mentioned earlier, health risks such as STI's and substance abuse are related to exposure to gangs, as well as dating violence (Knox & Tromanhauser, 1999; Schalet et al., 2003). In an article written by Newbold and Dennehy (2003) a young, gang-related woman described her early exposure to violence at home:

Violence, yeah, and a lot of it was when they were drunk and they'd have parties at home, a lot of alcohol. There'd be a lot of violence and I hated it. You know as soon as I'd hear that fighting and screaming and things like that, I'd run into my room and just bang myself up.

Fleisher and Krienert (2004) found that 71% of girls involved in gangs were reporting physical abuse within their homes prior to or concurrent with their gang membership. They also reported that over half of their sample reported coming from homes where one or more parents had been arrested. Similarly, Sims, Dodd, and Tejeda (2008) found that witnessing parental violence and childhood maltreatment was also related to dating violence. A relationship between gang affiliation and dating violence may be a reflection of these overlapping predictors. In particular, factors, such as child sexual abuse, violence, neglect, inter-parental violence, parental drug use, and alcohol, have been shown to greatly increase an individual's risk for involvement in dating violence and gang activity (Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001; Newbold & Dennehy, 2003). For some female victims of early abuse, violence is a valid method of conflict resolution. Many of these victims find it easy to adjust to violence experienced in later dating relationships because of the abuse that they experienced and accepted as a part of childhood life. (Newbold & Dennehy, 2003). In a response to years of victimization in youth, many abused women find themselves attracted to dominant alpha males who can make

them feel protected and can provide a sense of respect and status (Newbold & Dennehy, 2003). In the search for status and protection, many women find themselves attracted to men affiliated with neighborhood gangs.

2. Method

To conduct this review, the authors initially compiled all primary sources (empirically based journal articles) from the behavioral sciences on the topic of gang involvement with analyses specific to relationship abuse, IPV, and sexual victimization.

2.1. Search strategy

Key terms, such as, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and dating violence, were paired with the key word gang(s) when searching for the appropriate articles in the major search engines (included but not limited to, Criminal Justice Abstracts, PsychINFO, PsycARTICLES, MEDLINE, and Academic Search Premier) in addition to Google scholar searches. Approximately 62 articles were initially identified and evaluated in the preliminary search using the identified keywords. Additionally, the reference pages of the primary sources were searched for relevant articles and cited reference searches were conducted to yield additional sources. Of those retrieved, 18 met the criteria and were included in the present review.

2.2. Study design

The purpose of the current review is to summarize what is known about IPV among youth in the context of gang involvement. Researchers aim to utilize empirical studies toward the goal of deconstructing the context of gang involvement in order to understand the mechanisms of risk for IPV perpetration and victimization. A secondary aim of the current review is to increase the knowledge base of gang-related IPV for use by both researchers and practitioners.

2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles published between 1970 and 2011 were included in the present review. Only individual empirical studies located in peer-reviewed journals (qualitative or quantitative in nature) or empirical studies published in books were selected. Sources that were conference proceedings, non-individual, non-empirical book chapters, editorial, and/or theoretical in nature, and dissertations were excluded. Articles were required to report or identify the occurrence, frequency or nature of IPV within the gang population being studied in their results. Those studies drawing only conclusions about potential or possible IPV were not included as there was no clear evidence supporting that participants engaged in this behavior. Articles were also considered based on their definition of gang behaviors. Some articles used broader terms such as "neighborhood disorder" or "neighborhood violence", these terms were compared to characteristics of typical gang behavior (i.e., group involvement and organization, identification with a gang, initiation contingents, criminal or violent behavior) and selected if criteria were met.

The definition of gangs was taken from a research brief provided by Maxson, Klein, and Cunningham (1993) which defined a street gang as a group of individuals who share recognizable symbols; "a geographic territory, regular meeting patterns" and behave in an "organized, continuous course of criminality." For this review, IPV was most often defined as emotional abuse, physical abuse (throwing something, pushing, grabbing, slapping, choking, beating, using a weapon such as a gun or knife), sexual abuse (forced contact and intercourse), psychological and economic abuse (Cooper et al., 2006; Totten, 2000).

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