



Gangs, clubs, and alcohol: The effect of organizational membership on adolescent drinking behavior



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ABSTRACT

How does adolescent organizational membership in general, and simultaneous membership in distinct types of organizations in particular, impact drinking behavior? While past studies have focused either on the learning effect of involvement with gangs or on the constraining influence of conventional organizations on adolescent problem behavior, we explore the possibility that conventional school clubs can serve as socializing opportunities for existing gang members to engage in drinking behavior with non-gang club members. Using the Add Health data, we show that gang members drink more often, and engage in more binge drinking, than non-members. More importantly, individuals who are members of both gangs and school clubs drink alcohol at greater levels than those who are solely involved in gangs. In addition, non-gang adolescents who are co-members with gang members in the same school club are more likely to drink alcohol than non-members. This result has important implications for understanding the role of organizations in adolescent behavior and suggests that the study of delinquent behaviors would benefit from devoting more attention to individuals who bridge distinct types of organizations.

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1. Introduction

How does organizational membership influence adolescent drinking behavior? Previous studies in criminology have explained adolescent delinquency and problem behavior by focusing on the effect of interpersonal networks. These studies differ in viewing either learning from delinquent peers (Akers, 1985; Burgess and Akers 1966; Sutherland, 1947), constraints by societal norms (Gibbs, 1989; Hirschi, 1969), or opportunities to be delinquent in front of others (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Gold, 1970; Osgood et al., 1996), as the most salient factors, but are similar in emphasizing the importance of interpersonal networks to determining one's engagement in problem behavior. However, interpersonal relationships are not the only source of influence; individual linkage to organizations has an impact on adolescents that has not received adequate attention.

Previous studies that have examined organizational involvement have focused on the learning effect of involvement with delinquent organizations such as youth gangs (Battin et al., 1998; Bjerregaard, 2010; Decker and van Winkle, 1996; Spengel, 1995) or on the constraining influence of conventional organizations, such as school clubs (Crosnoe, 2001; Kreager, 2007;

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Mahoney and Cairns, 1997; McNeal, 1995; Thorlindsson and Bernburg, 2006), on adolescent problem behavior. Yet the literature is silent on individuals who belong to both types of groups simultaneously. By assuming that participation in one type of organization will discourage, or even prevent entirely, participation in the other type of organization (Glueck and Glueck, 1950; Hirschi, 1969; Sutherland, 1947), past studies have failed to distinguish between those who devote their limited time and attention to, and are under the exclusive influence of, a single type of organization and those who enjoy socializing opportunities in multiple kinds of organizations. This is a serious oversight in understanding adolescent problem behavior because a large number of adolescents are likely involved with multiple organizations, and exclusive and joint membership in gangs and school clubs may attenuate or enhance engagement in problem behavior. We fill this theoretical gap by exploring the possibility that conventional organizations can serve as socializing opportunities for existing gang members to exhibit their drinking behavior and spread a drinking repertoire to club-members who are not involved in youth gangs.

We focus on the effects of membership to explain adolescents' drinking behavior. Adolescent alcohol use is illegal, but still a common and widespread element in the adolescent behavioral repertoire in the United States (Eaton et al., 2012; Johnston et al., 2010).¹ On the one hand, adolescent drinking is perceived as a problem behavior that conventional society generally discourages. Adolescent use of alcohol is reported not only to harm academic achievement and enhance emotional distress (Crosnoe et al., 2004), but also to serve as a gateway for some individuals, under certain social contexts, to involvement with more serious criminal and delinquent behaviors (Felson et al., 2008; Parker and Auerhahn, 1998; Rossow, 1996). On the other hand, adolescents often accept drinking behavior as common or unremarkable and can easily participate through association with alcohol-using peers (Curran et al., 1997; Fujimoto et al., 2013; Kreager and Haynie, 2011). Since adolescents often drink together in a group setting to socialize with each other, alcohol use is categorized as a behavior that should be highly sensitive to immediate social pressures (Warr, 2002). Alcohol use is therefore a good candidate to test our theoretical model of the effect of organizational membership.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), we examine the determinants of adolescent drinking behavior measured by both drinking frequency and binge drinking. We find that gang members are more likely to drink alcohol than non-members. Involvement in conventional school clubs, on the other hand, does not significantly influence the likelihood. More importantly, simultaneous members of both gangs and school clubs engage in both frequent drinking and binge drinking at greater levels than members who are exclusive members of gangs. In addition, exclusive members of conventional clubs are also more likely to engage in drinking behavior than non-members when they are co-members with gangs in the same school clubs. In other words, our results suggest that members who have a foot in both the delinquent and the conventional worlds not only engage in drinking behavior to a greater extent, but also influence non-gang members to drink alcohol through co-membership in conventional clubs. Our results point to an important area for future study regarding the complex relationship between organizations and delinquency.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Criminological theories of problem behavior

Past studies have emphasized the importance of social interaction with others to an individual's involvement in delinquency and problem behavior, and have generated three distinct, but not mutually exclusive, theoretical accounts that are relevant to our study: the social learning perspective, the social control perspective, and the social opportunity perspective. The social learning perspective originated in the differential association theory tradition that focuses on how individuals learn favorable or unfavorable definitions toward criminal behavior through association with others (Sutherland, 1947). Building on this tradition, the social learning perspective primarily focuses on the learning process of delinquent behavior (Akers, 1985; Burgess and Akers 1966). According to social learning theory, individuals observe their peers' behaviors and feel normative pressure to do the same during social interaction with delinquent friends. Thus, delinquency is a particular set of definitions, motivations, and behaviors that are learned from associates who already possess them, and individuals are prone to imitate their delinquent friends' behaviors in order to receive positive rewards, to avoid punishment, and to become more integrated into their social circles (Akers, 1985). Empirical research is consistent with this perspective, showing that having delinquent peers increases the likelihood of engaging in delinquency and other problem behavior (Haynie, 2001; Rice et al., 2003; Warr, 2002; Warr and Stafford, 1991).

The social control perspective is similar to the learning perspective in its focus on normative pressure, but distinct in its primary emphasis on the role of social bonds that constrain adolescents from engaging in problem behavior (Gibbs, 1989; Hirschi, 1969). The assumption, stemming from Durkheim (2010 [1951]), is that people may become delinquent if they are not prevented from doing so by social integration. More specifically, four elements of social bonds prevent adolescents from engaging in antisocial behaviors: (1) involvement in conventional activities, (2) attachment to significant others such as parents and teachers in school, (3) commitment to future goals such as college attendance and job attainment, and (4) beliefs in the moral values the society holds (Gibbs, 1989; Hirschi, 1969). Empirical studies provide evidence for this perspective and

¹ For example, Johnston et al. (2010) report in their Monitoring the Future study that 71% of American adolescents have drunk alcohol more than just a few sips by the end of high school.

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