

Commentary: Developmental Perspectives on Adolescents and Gangs

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Drawing from a sophisticated set of longitudinal studies, the five articles in this special section highlight factors that draw adolescents into gangs and the psychological and social impact of their involvement. We assess the contributions of these articles in the context of the broader field of gang studies, then point to factors that should characterize the next generation of studies of adolescents and gangs. Particular attention is paid to developmental features of adolescence that may shape the allure and impact of gang affiliation.

Adolescent gangs have preoccupied social scientists for nearly a century (Thrasher, 1927). Yet much about their dynamics and impact on young people's lives continues to elude investigators. Based on sophisticated statistical analyses of longitudinal data sets or careful, qualitative assessment of semi-structured interviews, the five empirical articles included in this special section add significant insights to our understanding of gangs. The efforts of these investigators are commendable, given the challenges of studying this phenomenon. Most youths who get involved in gangs are members for only 2 or 3 years, and their group's criminal activities and norms emphasizing loyalty and discretion discourage participation in social scientific research. A comprehensive review of studies (even of recent studies) on adolescent gangs is not feasible in the short space of this article. Rather, we strive to highlight features of the articles in this special section in the context of the larger body of research on gangs. Then, we offer recommendations for future research, with special attention to developmental perspectives on gang involvement.

The first challenge attendant to studying gangs is defining the phenomenon. Although there is an informal understanding that gangs are groups of young people whose collective action involves intimidating others and engaging in criminal, often violent behavior, there is no widely shared definition on which to standardize research. In some respects, most investigators proceed phenomenologically by allowing study participants to define the term "gang" for themselves. They ask participants to report on their membership in a gang without providing a concrete definition of gangs. The empirical basis for this approach is widely

shared (Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor, 2001) but perhaps more equivocal than is often acknowledged. We return to this issue later but, in the meantime, proceed under the assumption that it is appropriate to allow adolescents to impose their own, unarticulated definition of gangs on research study questions about their affiliations.

Researchers' primary concern with gangs is their impact on members, both over the short term of their group involvement and longer term after they have left the gang. If there is demonstrable impact, then it makes sense to investigate the factors that prompt young people to join gangs. These two topics encompass most of the research on gangs. Less widely considered are structural and functional characteristics of gangs: how their organization and operation affect their impact on members. We consider the reports in this special section in the context of these three major topics. We sidestep a set of studies concerned with broader sociocultural issues (economic structures, educational inequalities, and so on) that can affect gangs because they are less relevant to our five focal articles.

IMPACT OF GANG AFFILIATIONS

A host of studies has documented differences in the attitudes and behavior patterns between young people who do and do not claim membership in gangs. Most of these investigations are based on data from a single time point, making it impossible to determine whether differences were apparent prior or subsequent to some individuals joining gangs. More sophisticated, longitudinal data sets that feature data before and after the target group has joined a gang attempt to differentiate selection, facilitation, and enhancement effects that could

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account for group differences. Selection effects refer to differences between gang and nongang members that existed prior to gang affiliations. Facilitation effects capture the opposite pattern, when group differences emerge only after the target group has joined a gang. Enhancement effects describe a situation in which group differences existing prior to gang affiliations become stronger as the target group becomes involved in gang life. Such comparisons of gang and nongang affiliated youths provide an effective way of assessing the impact of gang membership on adolescents. Most investigators have concentrated on short-term effects, observable during the tenure of the target group in a gang. Some have extended their investigations to assess longer term effects that emerge or persist after young people have left the gangs and continued toward or into adulthood.

Short-Term Impact

In their recent review of research on gangs, Decker, Melde, and Pyrooz (2013) concluded that there was inadequate information to determine whether gangs have primarily facilitative or enhancing effects on member behavior. Several studies exemplify the challenges of pinpointing the source of effects. For example, using the nationally representative sample of participants in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, DeLisi, Barnes, Beaver, and Gibson (2009) found that young people victimized by peers were more likely to join gangs, but also likely to experience an increase in victimization beyond levels predicted by their pregang experiences. Although this appears to be a short-term enhancement effect, there was a 6-year gap between measurement of gang affiliations and assessment of changes in victimization. Because youths may have left the gang long before the 6-year follow-up, it isn't clear how much gang membership figured in their reports of increased victimization.

Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, and McDuff (2005) caution against over-generalizing observed short-term effects. In analyses of a sample of boys followed since kindergarten, they found facilitative effects of gang membership for boys (at ages 14–16) with transient gang memberships (less than a year), but enhancement effects for those who reported longer affiliations.

Gordon et al. (this issue) weigh in on the nature of short-term effects with their assessment of levels of delinquency among cohorts of early and middle adolescent boys from the Pittsburgh Youth Study.

Because delinquent activity is a common—if not defining—characteristic of gangs, it is an appropriate behavior on which to focus attention, but one for which one would naturally expect differences between gang members and nonmembers. By confining analyses to boys who acknowledged involvement in serious delinquency, whether or not they were gang members, the authors offered a stronger test of the power of gangs to influence adolescents' behavior. They found that, even in this delinquently oriented subgroup, gang members reported higher levels of serious delinquency during their time in the gang than the comparison group. This was also true in comparing the two groups in their year prior to the target group's initiation of gang activity, indicating that the differences fit the pattern of an enhancement effect.

Gordon et al. ventured beyond these basic findings to identify particular combinations of delinquent activities more characteristic of gang members than other delinquent boys. This would indicate that there is something about the organization or operation of gangs that directs deviant activity in particular ways. The authors did not explore this issue further, nor did they consider the possibility that gangs varied in the particular combination of deviant behaviors that they promoted. Pursuing these issues probably would require a different sampling frame, recruiting study participants from memberships of particular gangs. This is not a common approach in general studies of gang impact.

Long-Term Impact

Tracing the longer-term impact of gang membership requires investigators to follow adolescents not only through their experiences within a gang but well beyond, in the years subsequent to leaving a gang. Not only does this take more time, but it also opens up the possibility of more complex chains of events that residual effects follow. Not surprisingly, few scholars have charted these effects. Pyrooz (2014) was among several scholars to document lower ultimate levels of educational attainment among gang members. In his analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, young people in gangs were 30% less likely to graduate from high school and 58% less likely to earn a 4-year college degree than nongang peers. With data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, and Chu (2011) demonstrated the more complex, indirect path that can be traced from gang membership to

adult crime, an association mediated by the effect of gang membership on economic hardship and family problems subsequent to leaving the gang. Dishion, Véronneau, and Myers (2010) traced an equally complex cascade model, with several school and peer factors in Grade 6 predicting gang involvement by Grade 8, which led to deviancy training at ages 16–17 that was a precursor to violent behavior in early adulthood.

Drawing from the same data set as Krohn et al. (2011), Augustyn, Thornberry, and Krohn (this issue) assess gang-related precursors of young adults' maladaptive parenting. They too find a cascading effect in which a pattern of violence or victimization prior to joining a gang persists during gang involvement, then sets the stage for ex-gang members to mistreat their offspring as they move into adulthood. This study is valuable not only because it follows individuals over a long period of time (nearly 20 years) with high retention rates but also because it controls for numerous factors that are predictive of child maltreatment so that the unique effects of gang membership can be assessed. The study also emphasizes the impact of a nonnormative pattern of developmental transitions. Gang membership is associated with premature departure from educational institutions, premature cohabitation, and premature entry into parental roles, a life path that substantially increases the prospects that ex-gang members will engage in child maltreatment. In this developmental cascade, gang membership seems to drive young people out of age-normative roles and environments and into adult roles that, economically, cognitively, and/or emotionally, they do not appear to be ready to handle. The series of developmental missteps cuts across various aspects of young people's lives, making it clear that the delinquent or violent behavior characteristic of gangs is not the only factor, perhaps not even the dominant factor, leading to child maltreatment. Of course, the study is limited demographically and historically, begging replication. Some constructs are crudely measured—sometimes reduced to bivariate measures for the sake of the data analytical scheme. But the investigation exemplifies the type of research design needed to understand long-term impacts of gang affiliations on young people.

One important lesson to emerge from studies of the impact of gang membership is the importance of viewing gang involvement in life-course perspective. Beyond rather immediate effects of the gang, membership can initiate a cascade of maladaptive developmental transitions that affect

important aspects of adult functioning. Examination of these developmental cascades must continue.

MEMBERSHIP ISSUES

Having established significant impact of gang membership on adolescents' behavior and adjustment, both over the short and long term, investigators can legitimately turn to the issue of what drives young people into and out of gangs. A surprising but consistent finding is that, in most cases, gang membership is a short-term affair, lasting just 2 or 3 years, on average. Investigators have concentrated attention on joining or leaving the gang, with much less attention to status changes within the group while individuals retain a claim to membership. Certain demographic patterns are common. Gang membership is more likely among males, ethnic minority group members, youths from low socioeconomic levels, and early adolescents than their demographic comparison groups. Contemporary research focuses more attention on psychosocial factors that might account for these demographic patterns.

Joining a Gang

Scholars differentiate push and pull factors associated with joining a gang. *Push* factors are individual or environmental characteristics that increase the likelihood of membership. Several such factors have been identified in each of five major domains: school, family, peer group, neighborhood, and within the individual. *Pull* factors are characteristics of the gang that entice individuals into joining; they have received less attention than push factors.

The challenge in identifying specific factors that increase the risks of gang involvement, according to recent reviews of relevant research (Decker et al., 2013; Howell & Egley, 2005) is that they span all five domains listed above. Evidence suggests that the likelihood of gang involvement is better predicted from the number and breadth (across the five domains) of risk factors rather than the specific risks that adolescents encounter. Some studies, however, suggest that there are interactions among factors that discourage a simple count of risks. For example, in a nationally representative sample of Canadian mid-adolescents, Dupéré, Lacourse, Wilms, Vitaro, and Tremblay (2007) found a set of peer, family, neighborhood, and individual factors that contributed to gang membership, but one individual factor, childhood psychopathic tendencies,

was only a significant risk among young people living in neighborhoods with low residential stability.

Two of the studies in this special section address push factors. Drawing data from the Seattle Social Development Project, Gilman and colleagues identified three factors in three separate domains that were strong predictors of who would be drawn into a gang: living with a gang member (usually a sibling), living in a neighborhood with high rates of antisocial behavior, and high levels of antisocial activity within one's peer group. Somewhat surprisingly, the strength of these factors did not differ by gender or age at entry into the gang. However, it should be noted that predictors were drawn from data gathered in the year before participants first claimed gang membership. More distal predictors from earlier in childhood could have age- or gender-dependent influence.

This could help to explain the presence of age differences in data examined by Dmitrieva, Gibson, Steinberg, Piquero, and Fagan (this issue). Their investigation followed the gang histories of a much narrower sample of youths (males, age 14–17 at study entry, drawn from a population of youths adjudicated for delinquent activities), concentrating on potential predictors of gang membership within one domain: individual characteristics. The predictive utility of some variables did change with age. For example, grandiose-manipulative and impulsive-irresponsible dimensions of psychopathology were more predictive of gang entry among older than younger participants, whereas self-esteem level lost its predictive utility across age. It isn't clear whether the investigators used measures of these variables immediately preceding gang entry or from earlier phases of data collection.

Assessment of factors pulling people into gangs has lagged behind examination of push factors. What features of gangs or gang life are most attractive to potential members? Part of the answer may lie in young people's motives for joining. In a longitudinal study of middle school youths, Melde, Taylor, and Esbensen (2009) found that gang members feared being victimized less than nongang members, even though they actually experienced higher rates of victimization. The lure of a protective company of peers could be a strong incentive to join a gang, especially for early adolescents who are targets of bullying or who have been victims of aggressive acts. It is also possible that the prospects of protection by fellow gang members will be less alluring as young people age and become more physically mature or better situated with friendships.

It is important for investigators to continue to pursue the developmental question of how well characteristics in each of the five domains of push factors as well as various pull factors predict entry into gangs at different ages across adolescence. Also at issue is whether these characteristics have temporally proximal or distal effects: are characteristics most salient just prior to gang entry, or are behaviors observed earlier, in childhood, strong indicators of later gang involvement? Here, developmental cascades witnessed in studies of the impact of gang membership could emerge as strong predictors. Just as push factors span several domains and have interactive as well as cumulative effects, predictors of gang membership may be temporally linked in an interactive sequence.

Leaving a Gang

There are also push and pull factors that precipitate a person's departure from a gang, but they are defined differently from their role in joining a gang. Push factors tend to emanate from within the individual, such as growing tired or fearful of the violence associated with gang life. Pull factors represent forces outside of the gang that pull members toward a different lifestyle: parenthood or employment, for example. Research by Scott Decker and his colleagues, including the article for this special section, suggests that push factors may outweigh pull factors: young people simply "mature out" or grow weary of the gang lifestyle (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Contrary to popular belief, most individuals leave the gang without a hostile departure experience (e.g., being "beaten" out or forced to commit some violent act before exiting). Push factors tend to precipitate hostile departures more often than pull factors, but even in this case, they constituted only about a third of the cases that Pyrooz and Decker (2011) uncovered among their interviews with older adolescent gang members. A consistent finding is that leaving a gang is a process much more often than an event, even though it may have been triggered by a particular episode. Time spent leaving the gang is somewhat contingent on the time spent in the gang and the degree of embeddedness within the group.

Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule (this issue) illustrate some of the dynamics of desistance in their mixed-methods study of a sample of young adults formerly associated with youth gangs. Comments from these individuals, who are either incarcerated or participants in a street outreach program to current and former gang members, deftly illustrate

Ebaugh's (1988) four stages of role exit. Other portions of Decker et al.'s data indicate that the process of leaving a gang is not necessarily linear and is likely to take longer for those more deeply embedded in the gang. It also appears to be strongly influenced by ties to more conventional institutions, especially the family, but work and religious organizations as well. The authors caution other investigators that self-reports of desistance can be misleading because declaring oneself to no longer being a gang member is not the same as cutting gang ties completely.

It would be dangerous to generalize the findings of Decker et al.'s study to adolescents. These are retrospective accounts from individuals who were much older at gang exit and who stayed in gangs much longer than most adolescents. Leaving a gang in one's early 20s may be a very different process from leaving in one's mid-teens. The developmental tasks attendant to these two time frames should create distinctive developmental contexts through which to work out the transformations in social roles and identity that can be part of gang desistance. Nevertheless, the investigation points to important elements to incorporate into studies of younger, more demographically diverse populations of gang members. Researchers recognize desistance as a process contingent on one's level of involvement in gangs and involving a transformation in roles, identities, social relationships, and group loyalties, rather than a simple act of quitting an activity.

THE ROLE OF GANG STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

Many investigations (including several in this special section) do not venture into the organizational details of gangs, preferring to base their studies simply on differences between self-proclaimed gang and nongang members. The tacit assumption is that all gangs share core characteristics that make further differentiation unnecessary. The research, although limited, does not uphold this assumption. Structural differences in the degree of organization or differentiation of membership levels, as well as functional differences in gang operations, seem to contribute significantly to members' experiences and outcomes.

Structural Issues

Scholars have debated whether gangs are structured more like corporations or informal peer

groups. A corporate structure would involve a set of hierarchical, possibly insular relations with specific tasks at various levels of the hierarchy and clear-cut rules or procedures for group activities. An informal structure would feature lateral relationships, diffuse leadership, and spontaneous activity. The latter structure seems to be more common than the former, especially among younger adolescents. Within their sample of nearly 100 middle school students who were current or former gang members, Decker and Curry (2000) found that most reported a loose organization within their gang: three-quarters of the group carried on friendships with peers outside the gang while they were gang members. Some gangs are more organized, however, and that organization does seem to affect member characteristics or experiences. Bouchard and Spindler (2010) compared Canadian teens who said they belonged to a "relatively organized gang" to those who said they were part of a "youth group involved in deviance of any sort" in the past year. Those in organized gangs reported higher levels of delinquency and drug selling. Moreover, level of organization (the number of nine organizational characteristics that study participants ascribed to their gang or delinquent group) partially mediated associations between group type and problem behavior. Esbensen et al. (2001) asked a large, multicity sample of eighth graders whether they were members of a gang, and if so, whether their group had engaged in delinquent activities and had organizational features such as initiation rites, leaders, and symbols or colors. Whereas the most significant contrast was between those who did versus did not claim membership in a gang, members of more organized gangs reported lower levels of parental monitoring, higher levels of risk taking, and higher delinquent attitudes and behavior.

It is also possible to differentiate gang members by their level of integration into the group: whether they are leaders or just followers, core or peripheral group members. Only one of the articles in this special section attended to these structural differences, but the findings were instructive. Comparing nongang youth to lower level members and leaders, Dmitrieva et al. found distinctive characteristics among comparison groups and, more importantly, distinctive patterns of change in characteristics over time. For example, gang leaders had higher levels of self-esteem than members, but only toward the end of the teenage years. Lower level members displayed increases in impulsive-irresponsible traits, a pattern observed among leaders only at younger ages. Leaders, unlike lower level

members, displayed increases in grandiose-manipulative psychopathology over time.

Functional Issues

Structural factors can affect gang functions in ways that alter member experiences. Decker et al. (2013, p. 381) noted that “gangs with instrumental-rational organizational structures are able to accomplish collective goals and complete discrete tasks, many of which are criminal; gangs with informal-diffuse organizations encounter difficulties in achieving criminal goals and establishing stability.” As gangs take on corporate functions, such as the sale and distribution of illicit drugs within a specific territory, they may strive to delimit members’ violent behavior and instruct members to inhibit criminal activity in general within their territory because it is “bad for business.”

Ethnographers have charted the experiences of young people in various types of gangs (e.g., Densley, 2013; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Ward, 2012). They provide rich details about the operations of gangs and the impact on members, but because each study concentrates on a specific gang or set of gangs, and because there is not a representative comparison group of nongang members, it is difficult to draw general conclusions about how different functional systems affect developmental trajectories of members. This, then, becomes an issue for closer consideration in future research.

NEXT STEPS FOR GANG RESEARCH

The articles included in this special section indicate that the study of adolescents and gangs has come of age. Moving beyond correlational studies with small, select samples, investigators have initiated and then analyzed large data sets that follow young people for years, catching them before, during, and after their involvement in gangs. Using sophisticated statistical analyses, quantitative researchers have been able to identify key factors in numerous domains that contribute significantly to adolescents’ entry into and exit from gangs, and they have demonstrated long-term and short-term impacts of gangs on several facets of adolescent adjustment. Although some aspects of these basic questions about impact and involvement remain to be resolved, it is time to move on to a deeper level of analysis, looking more carefully at the variety of experiences that adolescents have with gangs and the conditions under which certain outcomes of gang affiliations can be observed. In this spirit, we

offer several recommendations for the next generation of studies.

First, investigators should assess gang affiliations at a deeper level. The simple self-report of “being in a gang” is insufficient to understand the level of an adolescents’ involvement or the nature of the group with which they are involved. Individuals claiming to be in a gang display marked diversity in their definition of a “gang” (Petersen, 2000). Bjerregaard (2002) found that a simple follow-up question to self-proclaimed gang members (whether theirs was an organized gang or just a bunch of people) created subgroups that differed significantly in descriptions of their gangs’ and their own behavior. As a step in determining gang membership, Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, and Kosterman (this issue) had police verify that the group in which a study participant claimed membership was a recognized gang. This is a good step toward enhancing validity, but it is possible to go much further. Dishion, Nelson, and Yasui (2005) created a composite measure of gang involvement based on information from teachers, school counselors, and peers as well as the adolescent. Decker et al. (2013) encourage broader use of sociometric data, which can not only locate an adolescent’s position within a gang but also reveal important features about the group’s structure. These procedures are more labor-intensive than simple self-report, but they yield richer and more reliable information about an adolescent’s connection to a gang.

Second, rather than treating social context as a confound that needs to be controlled in data analyses (e.g., Dmitrieva et al., or Gilman et al., this issue), investigators should begin a more systematic assessment about how context helps to shape adolescents’ experiences in gangs. Many studies identify school, family, peer, and neighborhood “risk” factors for gang involvement, but rarely do they follow up with investigations of how features of these contexts shape young people’s experiences within gangs. Why, for example, did Miller, Barnes, and Hartley (2011) find that Mexican American youths were drawn to gangs if they had relatively low levels of acculturation and high levels of ethnic marginalization? Why are African American adolescents more likely to report gang involvement if they grow up in rural or suburban than urban settings, whereas gang membership is more common among urban than suburban or rural European American youths (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Goldweber, & Johnson, 2013)? How and for whom do religious organizations facilitate

adolescents' exit from gangs (Decker et al., this issue)? To address these questions, scholars will need to conduct more context-intensive research. The large samples and diversity of sampling frames among studies in this special section (drawing from school or community populations or targeting adjudicated or incarcerated youths) have been vital to identifying general patterns. Now, concentrated examination of theoretically meaningful subgroups of adolescents in specific contexts can generate a deeper understanding of how adolescents actually experience gangs. The concentration on adolescents in major metropolitan areas must evolve to greater attention to other settings as the presence of gangs grows in smaller communities. Attention to historical factors or cohort experiences that might shape involvement in gangs or delinquency (e.g., Gordon et al., this issue) is also desirable.

Third, developmental facets of gang involvement should be considered more carefully, both conceptually and empirically. It is unusual for scholars to situate their studies in the developmental context of their participants. Rarely do researchers offer a clear developmental justification for initiating their study at a particular age, let alone to the developmental demands of that life stage. For example, how do the developmental features of early adolescence—burgeoning demands for identity and autonomy development, reformulations of peer and family relationships, and insecurities surrounding pubertal changes—figure into early adolescents' decisions about joining gangs? How does developmental progression on these issues affect interest in gangs in middle and later adolescence? Do these developmental issues help to account for the relatively short duration of most adolescents' careers in gangs? We have seen that the organization and operation of the adolescent peer system and its constituent cliques or crowds change over the course of adolescence (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994); how do gangs fit into this developmental program?

Another facet of development in need of closer examination is the course of an adolescent's gang career. Too little attention has been paid to the amount of time adolescents spend in gangs and their changing status within the group. Are they consistent or sporadic members? Do they progress into and then out of central or leadership positions? Dmitrieva et al. display the discrepant trajectories of peripheral and central group members. Other scholars note a rise and, then, fall in deviant behaviors or other attributes as adolescents move in and out of gangs (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). To

capture these developmental changes, investigators will need to move away from an arbitrary schedule of measurement and consider strategies such as measurement bursts (Sliwinski, 2011), in which there may be a quick succession of measurements over the short time frame when specific developments begin or seem most likely to happen, followed by a longer period of no measurement.

Just as individuals have a developmental history within a peer group, the group itself may change over time. High turnover in membership because of the relatively short period that young people spend in gangs poses a threat to the group's continuation. Yet, just as more conventional adolescent crowds can continue across generations (Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007), gangs may have considerable staying power. The nature of the gang may evolve over the course of its existence. Some groups become more organized, more specialized; orientations may change from protecting turf to dealing drugs. There may be shifts in the group's size or the age span of members, especially if collaborations with other gangs occur or dissolve. These organizational and operational shifts can alter expectations and experiences of members, so they are important factors to consider in gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of gangs on members.

The work being proposed here is very challenging. It would require investigators to develop and maintain close and trusting relationships with young people before, during, and beyond their period of gang involvement. It would demand closer attention to features of the gang as a social organization and its place in the surrounding peer system and neighborhood. There are good theoretical models to guide this sort of developmental-ecological approach. As commendable as the large-scale, longitudinal studies reported on in this section are, the insights they offer into adolescents and gangs are limited. We need to know more to design effective prevention/intervention efforts to guide those attracted to gangs toward healthy adjustment to the demands of adolescence and young adulthood.

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