

Full Length Research Paper

Why American boys join street gangs

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It is well known that street gangs flourish in low-income African-American ghettos and Mexican barrios. There have been a moderate number of studies surrounding the reasons why youth join gangs. However, few have emphasized the life path of gang members beginning from age 7 years through adolescence and what Erickson (1950) identified as industry versus inferiority and identity versus role confusion stages of psychosocial development. This paper contributes to the literature on gang recruitment and socialization by introducing the life path of gang members, providing a rationale as to why certain boys join gangs, and shows how developmental patterns are consistent with DSM-IV-TR categorical criteria of oppositional defiance disorder, conduct disorder, and antisocial disorder patterns of delinquent youth.

Key words: Peer group, intimidation, Gangs, young adults, society.

INTRODUCTION

The street gang, as a social problem and as social phenomena has been very difficult to nail down because it is an evolution, one in which many researchers wish to discover in adolescent identity crisis, or explain in completely socioeconomic and/or urban historical terms. Solutions to the problem of gangs lie in gaining more knowledge about childhood tendencies and predispositions that facilitate gang recruitment which start earlier in the boy's psychosocial development. The fact is that gangs usually target potential members one youth at a time, as individuals, not as a group of gang hopefuls. Potential members are targeted based on characteristics that the gang feels will further their goals and add to their numbers, this is often taken for granted in much of the literature on gangs. Gang literature over the years has emphasized environmental risk factors in gang-populated communities, with some attention given to protective factors being described as originating from well-adjusted home life. However, risk factors that facilitate gang membership are as likely to stem from a boy's home life as are protective factors. In fact, as will be noted later, the earlier that inner conflicts, low frustration tolerance, anxiety etc... begin, the more likely they are to have

originated from home life. Inner conflicts and frustration can make a boy vulnerable to the lure of the gangs and their deviant behaviors. Gangs offer release from, and/or expression of, frustrations and bad feelings, protection from hostiles in the neighborhood, a peer group, and ways to make money, especially during the recruitment and socialization phases of gang membership. The potential member must be willing to commit violence and be aggressive toward others; this is most of what sets the gang member apart from a non-gang member, this is one key reason why only certain boys join gangs.

Studies rooted in urban environment, criminology, socio-cultural economics, issues of the underclass, community history and other social scientific research has provided relevant and cogent information. The knowledge gained from these studies has been used to develop various gang reduction programs and strategies. However, the issue of gang perpetuation and proliferation should also be approached from the standpoint of a progressive child development perspective and dynamic, more specifically, a person-environment interaction. When a troubled child is introduced to a gang-populated community environment, the potential for gang

membership is high.

Due to economic impacts on low-income minority families, family disruptions such as divorce are often the result, which lead to additional frustration in the home. The child's psychosocial development may be negatively impacted by the disruption. Erikson (1950) stated that, "Ultimately, children become neurotic not from frustrations, but from the lack or loss of societal meaning in frustrations." The potential gang member's response to his frustrations may be manifest in joining a gang, given the salience of gangs in his environment and his disturbed disposition. Once he becomes a member he becomes a recruiter for the gang and assists in the socialization of new members, which over time perpetuates the ongoing development of street gangs as a social problem and phenomena.

When a child's neurotic predispositions due to family problems are combined with a gang populated, pathogenic neighborhood environment, children often join street gangs. The familial sources of neurotic disposition such as fear, feelings of uselessness, anger, frustration, resentment, and self-pity may contribute to, or be the result of, a child's inability to resolve psychosocial developmental issues. In addition, once initiated into a street gang, he may exhibit an increased level of delinquency and proactive aggression due to identification with, and assimilation of, gang norms and values. As the child matures into school age, he is consistently introduced into the pathologically infused environment through school attendance and neighborhood involvement. There are three primary factors become important for gang affiliation (a) interest, which may include fantasizing about benefits and advantages of joining the gang (b) contact with members, which provides an opportunity to interact with a gang and (c) willingness to perpetrate violence upon others, which makes them useful to the gang. If either one or more of these attributes is missing the youth is not a potential gang member. Johnstone (1983) states that, first and foremost, a youth must live in a locale where gangs exist, and that opportunities for gang membership are likely to be higher in urbanized, low-income neighborhoods than in neighborhoods which are higher on the socio-economic scale.

This study suggests a progression of psychosocial criteria which make children strong candidates for gang membership. The paper shows an evolution beginning with a child's frustrations and anxiety stemming from the family to antisocial dispositions and behavior learned in, and influenced by, the context of gang-populated communities. The study suggests a relationship between a child's home life and subsequent frustrations, and gang membership. Children who fit the criteria for conduct disorder (CD) which includes aggressive physical contact with peers appear to be particularly prone to delinquency and eventual gang membership in study subjects. This study also suggests that neuroticism in home life is associated with frustrations in which gang recruiters and

socializers are particularly attuned, and utilize the frustrations from home life to lure children with such frustrated home lives into street gangs.

Parental anxiety, depression, neurotic dispositions and tendencies are often the result of families' inability to deal effectively with socioeconomic factors such as substance abuse, fatherless homes, mother-headed households where it is difficult to provide adequate supervision, and a host of other ecological factors well-documented as being associated with low income communities. These and other risk factors associated with low-income families and the underclass can hinder a child's balanced psychosocial development. These risk factors can also be the catalyst to start a progression from oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) through to antisocial disorder (APD) and sociopathic behavior, especially if not counter-balanced by protective factors such as after school or athletic programs, which provide positive role models.

The subjects in this study had a history of exhibiting behaviors consistent with DSM-IV-TR criteria for APD in their early adulthood and reported a childhood history consistent with DSM IV-TR criteria for ODD and conduct disorder (CD). Though there is a plethora of evidence citing evidence of peer influence as it relates to gang membership, there is currently scant research in the area of how childhood anxiety, depression, hostile feelings and frustration initiate psychosocial progression that often contributes to boys joining street gangs.

Boys' rationale for joining gangs

As mentioned above there have been a number of studies surrounding the reasons why youth join gangs. However, few have emphasized the life path beginning at Erikson's (1950) industry versus inferiority stage and earlier. This study found 9 primary reasons youth join gangs which correspond to much of the literature including:

- The recruiter was friendly and encouraging toward them
- The gang offered safety and protection from other gangs
- The potential gang member viewed the recruiters and socializers as very accepting of them
- Belonging to a gang as a quick path to gaining respect from other youth in the community gained through intimidation of other community children
- The potential member, more specifically, the member being recruited, feels that membership in the gang enhances their masculinity and reputation of being "tough"
- The possibility of making money, owning a car and having positive attention from girls
- Opportunity for delinquency and violence as a release of frustrations common to adolescence
- To have fun by committing delinquent acts with other

delinquent peers

- The opportunity to participate in activities that allow for temporary escape by "acting out" frustrations that stem from family dysfunction

All of the psychosocial histories of gang members in this study were diverse, however there were several underlying consistent themes prevalent in each members life history (1) frustration and anxiety stemming from family problems such as fatherlessness, (2) sadness, frustration, and anxiety in home life (3) the feeling that they wanted an end to the frustration (4) expression of hostility through defiance of authority in the industry versus inferiority stage and physical violence in the identity versus role and confusion stage of psychosocial development and, (5) misconduct at school, mostly for fighting or bullying schoolmates, and (6) gang membership as a salient opportunity for peer recognition in their immediate neighborhood and community. Their gang, study subjects explained, was a way they believed they could have friends and participate in delinquent activities and proactive aggression and violence which they thought were fun. The joining of a street gang was presented to them by the gang recruiters as being a panacea. Subjects described gang membership as what they felt as a natural progression from hanging out with members to officially being initiated into the gang. Each study subject mentioned how the gang culture with its norms, values and activities, was interesting psychologically and a convenient way to acquire status in their neighborhood and community.

Gang organization

Gangs are often publicized and thought of as well-organized monoliths (Klein, 1995), whereas in this study of Los Angeles area, gang members described cohesion among smaller groups within their gang called "sets" or "cliques." For example a Crip gang member may belong to the "Rolling 60s" who claim territory in an area on the west side of town starting at west 60th street, hence the name, rolling 60s. The "eight tray gangsters" set, also a Crip gang, but claiming a gang turf starting at west 83rd street. Within these sets, there may be smaller groups, or "cliques", that tend to commit particular crimes. One clique may be focused more on robbery and purse snatching while another clique is more involved in, and known for, auto theft.

Joining a gang is not simply an affirmation that they would like to be part of the gang, there is an initiation that often involves "jumping in" this is a ritual mentioned by each of the subjects in this study as well as the teachers and gang intervention specialist interviewed. The initiation consists of usually four to seven regular members violently attacking the potential member with punches and kicks for 3 to 5 min. The potential member is required to fight back, though he is outnumbered. It is quite brutal,

but when it is over the member is hugged, greeted with handshakes and is officially part of the gang and must abide by all the gangs rules.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because the gang culture has been a major focus in American society, the following literature review addresses the definition of gangs in terms of several major theories on gangs as well as gang organization and other pertinent issues. There is much debate in the literature in terms of what a gang is (and/or is not). Therefore, it would be difficult to describe gang culture as a whole and in its totality since it includes many gang types and no agreed-upon definition among scholars and others. However, in accordance with the purpose of the paper which is to emphasize the person-environment interaction of a child reared in a gang populated environment and the role of family, some elaboration upon several theories is appropriate in understanding the culture of gangs and why boys join street gangs.

Defining a "Gang"

There are many definitions of the term "gang," however as Klemp-North, (2007) has stated, "...a consistent definition of 'gang' is lacking in both the fields of law enforcement and criminological research." For example, the definition by Sharp et al. (2006), "...a group of three or more that spends a lot of time in public spaces, has existed for a minimum of three months, has engaged in delinquent activities in the past 12 months, and has at least one structural feature, that is, a name, a leader, or code/rules (p.2)." This paper uses the term "street gang" to differentiate between the various uses of the term "gang" in media, law enforcement, academic, political, and/or other fields. Here, a street gang is defined as "a group of three or more persons who come together in association and communicates a philosophy that they will commit violent acts on persons, deface or destroy property; who have a name, and communicate to others in the community that they are the most violent, callous, and most dangerous group in that community while claiming some specific, identifiable, self-proclaimed geographic location." This definition then excludes hate groups, motorcycle gangs, and other terrorist-type organizations etc... According to Webster et al. (2006), street gangs (as defined in this paper) offer skills, skills contacts, the opportunity for crime, and a means to access illegal markets such as narcotics and stolen goods.

Gang culture and theories

Sutherland's (1937) theory of differential association

describes a gang in terms of learned criminal behavior with the principal part of this learning coming from within important personal groups. This theory looks toward the environment for explanations of criminal behavior. Sutherland's disassociation theory has been criticized for saying that pro-or anti-criminal attitudes develop through peer associations, but does not explain how the process works (Akers, 1997). Akers (1997) expands the idea of differential association to focus on social learning processes, proposing that criminal behavior in gangs is learned through the development of a belief system that crime is acceptable in certain situations. This researcher also views gang membership from a social learning perspective, but explains it in terms of a process of alternative socialization. Gang membership, recruitment and socialization is a combination of an individual's interest in gangs, contact with gang members, and a willingness to commit violent acts against others. With reference to peer groups and social learning, Thornberry (1998) does not view having delinquent peers as an adequate explanation for gang membership; however, having a social network of close friends and family members who are members of a gang is one of the main reasons why boys join gangs (Thornberry et al., 2003). Spergel (1995) mentions that children raised in the same household are "variably prone" to gang involvement.

Strain theory, on the other hand, conceptualizes American society as having set universal goals, and yet only offers the ability to attain them to a certain number of people, which then leads to a strain on cultural goals. Merton (1938) argues that this leads to anomie (Durkheim, 1893), that is, a collapse in the cultural structure due to the division between approved cultural norms and the capacity of certain marginalized groups and classes to function within them. Gang members are portrayed by Cohen (1955) as working class youth who experience some degree of distress, or "strain" which results in status frustration.

A key question in the literature on gang culture, recruitment and socialization is why boys join gangs (Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Klein and Maxon, 2006; Jankowski, 1991; Yablonsky, 1997; Klein, 1995). Grant and Feimer identify five aggregate responses of why urban youth join gangs. They mention the five primary reasons why youth become gang members including, (1) To belong to a group and have fun; (2) My friends are in a gang; (3) To feel accepted by others; (4) To have friends; and (5) My family doesn't care about me. Klemp-North (2007) identifies several studies focused on risk factors from an ecological perspective that account for why youth join gangs. He examined the Rochester Youth Development Study, the Denver Youth Survey, and the Seattle Social Development Project and mentioned some etiological issues that can increase the likelihood of gang membership such as low commitment to setting, a low expectation of school performance by teachers, labeling by teachers as being

"bad" or "disturbed," and high commitment to delinquent peers (Klemp-North, 2007). Jankowski (1991) does not see the decision to join a gang as an individual decision, but as part of various types of recruitment strategies (Jankowski, 1991) each within the context of low-income minority neighborhoods.

Another key issue in the literature on gangs has been the question of the disposition of youth who join gangs. Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) identify several perspectives from the literature important to understanding the disposition of youth who join gangs. The first is the selection perspective, which views gang members as individuals who are delinquent and violent prior to gang involvement (Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007). The second is the social facilitation perspective that posits that gang members are essentially no different from non-gang members until they join the gang. According to this perspective the gang begins to serve a normative function and is the source of delinquent behavior (Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007). The third perspective called the enhancement perspective proposes that new gang members are recruited from a pool of individuals who show a propensity to engage in crime and violence, but their level of violence, intensifies once they enter the gang structure which encourages crime and violence (Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007).

Though all three perspectives were important in understanding various cases in this study, the enhancement perspective was most applicable. This study fills the gap in the literature by examining the life path of gang members beginning from age 7 years through adolescence; it shows that progressive patterns of delinquency are consistent with DSM-IV-TR categorical criteria of oppositional defiance disorder (ODD) to conduct disorder (CD) and subsequently antisocial disorder (APD) patterns of delinquent youth. This paper also mentions how neuroticism in the family can contribute to gang recruitment. Neuroticism will be discussed in terms of an important dimension of personality consisting of the traits and behaviors such as anxiety, impulsivity, and proactive aggression that may lead to behaviors reminiscent of oppositional defiance, conduct disorder, and antisocial personality disorder in young adult years.

Street gangs a social problem

Some key points about the increase in gangs in the United States based on law enforcement reports through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the nation's largest cities (over 100,000 pop.) in 2009 include:

- There were an estimated 28,100 gangs and 731,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions nationwide.
- The prevalence rate of gang activity increased to 34.5% from 32.4% in 2008.

- Larger cities and suburban counties accounted for more than 96% of all gang homicides.

According to OJJDP, of the 167 cities that responded to the 2009 National Youth Gang survey (NYGS), a total of 1,017 gang homicides were reported. The report estimated that there were 28,100 gangs in 2009 and of the 3,500 jurisdictions participating in the survey there were 731,000 gang members. There was an increase in the number of gangs (20%) and in the number of jurisdictions reporting gang problems from 2002 to 2009. There has been a 5% increase on both indicators in more recent years. The number of gang members and the number of gangs has remained relatively steady at 750,000 members between 2002 and 2009. In a National Youth Gang Survey fact sheet (2009) it was reported that, "As in previous years, gang-related homicides were concentrated in the most populated jurisdictions," and that "larger cities and suburban counties accounted for more than 96% of all gang-related homicides surveyed (p.1)." These figures are very important in that they show that youth gang membership is increasing significantly in major U.S. cities and counties. Of the African-American and Latino youth who join gangs, usually join between the ages of 11 to 15 years of age, though there are some exceptions who join between 16 to 20 years old (Klein, 1995). The preadolescent and adolescent periods of joining a gang coincides with Erikson's (1950) industry versus inferiority and identity versus role confusion stages of psychosocial development. It is in these adolescent stages of identity development that people change in the way they think and feel about themselves (Steinberg, 1985). According to Klein (1995), street gang members are usually between the ages of 12 and 30 with an average age of approximately 20 years of age.

The teen years are when children are caught in a surge of psychosocial, biosocial, emotional and cognitive changes in which they must negotiate (Berger, 1994). The adolescent has more responsibility for mastering course material in middle school, and the peer culture at school often rewards popularity especially in sports and athletic activity (Sroufe et al., 1996), however, the street gang as we shall see in some of the psychosocial histories presented, are a salient alternative for certain youth leading to a path of an alternative socialization. Children at the psychosocial stages mentioned above often distinguish themselves and develop their own identity from their parents (Sappington, 1989), whereas the gang members turn to the alternative mores of the gang. Most importantly for this discussion is their affinity to become concerned with gangs, rather than more positive peer groups and cliques (Sappington, 1989). Adolescence is a crucial period of transition and relatedness to other individuals (Sherif and Sherif, 1964), which can facilitate street gang recruitment and subsequent socialization.

In terms of family impact on gang involvement,

Yablonsky (1997) notes that an adequate social self develops from a "consistent pattern of interaction with rational adult parents in a normative family socialization process". Goldstein (1991) stresses the fact that a child's family life is very important, particularly in the formative years since it is during this time that the child is developing morally, spiritually, socially, emotionally, physically as well as intellectually. Neuroticism involves a major dimension in personality nomenclature and classifies the chronic tendency towards the experience of negative thoughts and feelings, including anxiety, anger, hostility, self-consciousness, impulsivity, and vulnerability (Wasyliw et al., 2010). According to (Roelofs et al., 2006) psychopathological problems in children and adolescents can be categorized as internalizing or externalizing problems. Internalizing refers to feelings of anxiety and depression, and externalizing, manifests in disruptive, aggressive, and antisocial behavior (Roelofs et al., 2006). Neurotic symptomology may arise when a stressor or set of stressors exceeds an individual's vulnerability level (Jacobs et al., 2011), as is clearly exhibited in the lives of this study's gang affiliated respondents. Vulnerability characteristics vary between individuals (Jacobs et al., 2011). Neuroticism can be considered an indicator of a person's vulnerability to environmental adversity such as stress (Jacobs et al., 2011). Neurotic symptoms are acute or emergent psychological defensive structures and are attempts at managing internal conflict (Murray, 1994).

One very interesting point noted by Beiber (1997), explains how psychopathology can be traced to parents and caregivers, that the younger the child is at onset of a neurosis (or psychosis) the more likely the parents neurotic tendencies have affected the child, and that parental origin, with regard to the severity at an early age, is closely related to the probability of parental psychopathology. This has particular relevance to item 9 in the primary reasons boys join gangs mentioned in this study given the self-reports of the respondents. Johnstone (1983) mentions parental support, as an important aspect of adolescent development, and acknowledges that the extent to which parents provide continued moral and emotional support especially during periods of stress or difficulty are key to a child's healthy psychosocial development. This suggests that family support is indicative as a protective factor, as do the comments of Yablonsky (1997) and Goldstein (1991) mentioned earlier. Respondents in this study reported problems in their family life that they felt were directly linked to their feelings of anger, frustration and subsequent gang affiliation. Gangs were presented by respondents as a normal part of their environment and that they thought of their gang as family, therefore a primary source of their social reality, especially during the socialization process.

A child's orientation and adaptation to social reality as well as the interpreting and defining reality is a major function in parenting (Bieber, 1980). It is well known from

past as well as more recent studies on street gangs that children residing in single-parent mother headed households have higher rates of gang involvement (Yablonsky, 1997; Vigil, 1988; Espensen et al., 2009). In a study by Vigil (1988), he found that 9 out of 13 informants from mostly mother-centered households were regular gang members. Vigil (1988) stresses the importance of assessing socioeconomic conditions, such as mother-centered households, as important in understanding why adolescence is so significant with reference to gang membership. One primary factor that is particularly important in explaining the origin of behavior problems in youths, are family factors (Roelofs et al., 2006), that later combine with neighborhood risk factors. According to Geddes, father presence, whether in the household or not has been shown to be associated with:

- good parent—child relationships in adolescence
- satisfactory relationships in adult life
- fewer behavioral difficulties in adolescence
- less likelihood of boys being involved in delinquent acts involving police
- greater academic motivation in separated families, significant protection from psychological problems in adolescence.

“Geddes (2008) also mentions that “when children do not see their fathers much or at all, they can demonize them, idealize them, or blame themselves for their absence (p. 402)” Only 1 out of the 8 members in this study had a father that lived at home. Given that the participants were from completely different gangs from varying areas of Los Angeles, it showed a surprising consistency in the members’ lack of fathers’ participation in their lives as children. In addition to fatherless homes as a risk factor for gang membership, their neighborhood environment was a major contributing factor. There are also children who are born into families with gang affiliated family members according to all of the subjects in this study.

Erikson (1950) mentioned that it is the parents’ responsibility to guide the child through “permission and prohibition and by representing to the child conviction that there is meaning to what they are doing.” In a study done by Shepperson (1982) regarding assertion and aggression between normal and neurotic families, it was reported that assertive behaviors were more common in normal families as opposed to those families with neurotic parents. Sheppardson (1982) also cited studies which indicate that normal families evidenced less conflicted behavior patterns than disturbed families. Recent research has shown that the role of poor parental management, such as inconsistent and/or harsh discipline, permissiveness and poor supervision has a significant effect, “engendering both youth violence and gang affiliation (Espenson et al., 2009).”

According to Horney (1945) a child may not be able to grow according to his full potential if his home

environment is unable to provide him with adequate love, or if parental attitudes and perceptions of him are based in parents’ neurotic needs. She continues, mentioning that, one or both parents may be overindulgent, erratic, hypocritical, act partial toward other siblings, indifferent, irritable and a constellation of other dispositions that exerts a negative effect on the child’s development Horney (1945). An anxiety-ridden parent, for example, will respond to the child’s needs and demands based on their particular neurotic disposition, which is likely to result in profound insecurity, vague apprehensiveness, and what Horney refers to as “basic anxiety [in the child].”

The DSM–IV hypothesizes a hierarchal development from ODD to CD and subsequently to antisocial personality disorder (APD) (Burke et al., 2010). According to the literature the ODD progression occurs with only some children with ODD progressing to CD and only some youth with conduct disorder with a progression to APD (Burke et al., 2010) as young adults. Oppositional defiance is characterized by hostility toward authority figures, whereas with CD, the child exhibits a tendency to violate the basic rights of others (Loeber et al., 2009). The intervention specialists, the middle school teacher and each gang affiliated participant in this study reported evidence of this progression in their interviews. In a study done by Pardini and Fite (2010) Conduct disorder and ODD symptoms predicted both moderate and serious violence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the subject of gang member recruitment and socialization was explored using a review of the literature on gangs and face-to-face qualitative interviews with a variety of individuals who have had close, regular, interaction with gang members, some of whom were gang members themselves and were willing recipients and perpetrators of gang recruitment and socialization techniques and methods. Respondents in this study included five experienced or “veteran” Los Angeles county area gang members, a Los Angeles-based gang intervention worker who had himself been a gang member several years before working with the intervention program. The study also utilized two African-American male high school teachers both raised in Los Angeles County, one who avoided gang influence and works as a teacher and education manager for a charter high school on Los Angeles’ southeast side, the other was a Los Angeles area gang member in his youth, who is now a teacher in the Compton Unified School District. The veteran gang members interviewed for the study were chosen based on several criteria including, (a) their current status as adult members of an active Los Angeles gang (b) their ability to be confirmed by other people in the community as known gang members (c) their own testimony of gun violence perpetrated upon them by rival gangs in one or more occasions, (several having physical evidence of bullet wounds from these encounters) (d) their own testimony of gun violence toward rival members and (e) their capacity to coherently describe gang mindset, behavior, and organization.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of respondents in this study. Pseudonyms included, Joseph, an African American member of the Crip gang in South Central Los Angeles, Eddy and his brother Jose, both from Latino gangs in the Watts community in

Southeast Los Angeles, Roy, an African-American from a Crip gang, also in the Watts area, and Andre, an African-American member of a Blood gang in the city of Inglewood, a city in Los Angeles County with a population of about 114,000 people.

The school teachers were chosen based on their extensive experience in teaching adolescent gang affiliated youth in the public and charter school systems, and their willingness to discuss their own experiences with gangs as they grew up and attended Los Angeles area schools. Each of the teachers were African-Americans between the ages of 32 and 36 years of age at the time of the interviews. The gang intervention worker, TC, also an African-American male, had been a member of a Los Angeles gang prior to becoming a gang intervention worker, and works directly with Los Angeles gang members through the Venice 2000 gang intervention program. The program was funded by a grant through Bridges, one of Los Angeles' largest gang intervention projects.

All interviews were conducted in one of three community centers, the Inglewood Substance Abuse and Traffic Violators Agency in Inglewood, California (ISATV), the Robert Pitts Community Center in the Watts community of Southeast Los Angeles, and the Vera Davis McClendon Youth and Family Center located on the west side of Los Angeles in the Venice community. Each of the Centers is located within the boundaries of Los Angeles County. Interviewees were asked open and closed-ended questions and were encouraged to elaborate and clarify statements made. The interviews were semi-structured qualitative interviews designed to gather detailed and insightful information on gang recruitment and socialization processes.

Each interview was face-to-face and lasted between one and four hours. Several shorter additional face-to-face interviews were conducted with Joseph, Roy, Eddy and Andre lasting about one hour.

The researcher spent several years in each of the respective communities and held positions as Center Director for the Robert Pitts Center, senior counselor at the Inglewood Substance Abuse and Domestic Violators Agency (ISATV), and as stand-in director at the Vera Davis McClendon Center. These positions allowed the researcher to form qualitative, trusting relationships with community youth and families including the gang members, teachers, and the intervention counselor who were interviewed. The researcher's qualitative relationship with the interview respondents and the respective communities contributed to the willingness of respondents to participate with a high degree of openness and honesty and allowed the researcher to verify their status and roles in these community based settings, which increased information depth, and study reliability. Joseph and Andre were court-ordered participants in the domestic violence program at ISATVA, which served to emphasize the tendency toward violence in the lives of these two study participants. The researcher's senior counselor and director roles in the community centers facilitated the researcher's use of office space, and the subsequent privacy they afforded for the interviews. Pen and paper were used to document responses during each interview.

As the director of the Robert Pitts Center in southeast Los Angeles the researcher was able to use the close relationships formed with three veteran gang members in particular including, Eddy and Jose, who are from Watts area Latino gangs, and an African-American named Roy, from a Los Angeles faction of the Crip gang. Though Eddy and Jose are brothers, they are members of different Watts area gangs. Eddy belongs to a gang named "Just Fucking Killers" (JFK), and Jose did not mention the name of his gang. Watts is a low income high crime neighborhood well known for its high concentration of gang shootings in and around two of its City housing projects, Imperial Courts and Jordan Downs. Both housing projects are within the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) southeast division. The researcher met Eddy when he signed on to complete his court mandated community service hours there at the Robert Pitts Center. On the

day of Eddy's last interview he brought his brother, Jose, who sat in and participated in the discussion, but whose role was mostly validation and support to information given by Eddy. Jose described his experience of being shot by a rival gang, and mentioned that he joined his gang because his brothers and cousins were all in gangs, and that he wanted to prove to them that he was a "man". The interviews lasted four hours with both Eddy and Jose participating in the discussion. The researcher interviewed Eddy for a total of six hours for this study.

Roy was active in meeting with youth leaders in the neighborhood. He was surprised and appreciative that the researcher granted him access to the Center's meeting hall for his meetings with neighborhood groups without using his gang affiliation as a reason to restrict him access. This action, in addition to other assistance the researcher gave him in the formatting of some of his meetings, helped to improve the already open and trusting relationship. Roy was very forthcoming with detailed information, and was very lucid in his interviews, taking the time to assist the researcher with learning gang terminology and walking the researcher through the Jordan Downs housing project in Watts, enabling the researcher to meet local gang members and talk with them face-to-face. This contributed greatly to the researcher's understanding of the context in which gangs operate.

The two school teachers interviewed for the study were also persons whom the researcher met and came to know within the context of the community Centers. Mr. Todd was a client in the Driving Under the Influence (DUI) program in the Inglewood community center. He had been stopped by police while driving under the influence of alcohol and was referred to ISATVA by the courts to complete the DUI course. He was assigned to the researcher's class where the researcher met him for the first time. After completing the course he agreed to an in-depth interview that focused on his experiences with gang affiliated youth as a junior and senior high school teacher in the Compton Unified School district. Compton is a city in Los Angeles County with a population of about 100,000, located a few miles south of Los Angeles.

Mr. Rob teaches high school youth who have been identified by the Los Angeles public school system as unable to function in behaviorally appropriate ways in a normal public school setting. The charter school in which he teaches is located in the Robert Pitts center and has an annual student enrollment of about 60 students. As director of the Center, the researcher was able to observe the day-to-day activities and behaviors of the students and developed a trusting and positive professional relationship with Mr. Rob. My interview with Mr. Rob lasted 2 hours and focused on his observations and interaction of gang affiliated youth.

One of the strengths of this method and choice of study participants was the willingness of each participant to give detailed accounts, descriptions, and examples of their contact and interaction with Los Angeles gangs. The method makes use of individuals with important and relevant perspectives such as teachers, who directly observe gang and non-gang affiliated adolescents. This approach is further divided by utilizing one teacher with a gang history and another who resisted gang influences, as respondents. This combination offered a balance of perspectives and contributed to study depth.

Another important perspective was that of veteran gang members who were recruited and socialized into the gang, and who later helped to recruit and socialize others. Veteran gang respondents represented gangs from different areas in the Los Angeles County. Examining responses from gang members representative of different locations within the County, facilitated comparison and contrast of important characteristics including, gang organization, recruitment and initiation procedures, member status, nomenclature, and gang response to rule violations. It also enabled the researcher to generalize about Los Angeles gangs where appropriate, and to differentiate between operations and processes among the gangs.

Data analysis

Each of the research respondents were asked a set of open and closed ended questions in which they were encouraged to elaborate freely, and to explain and clarify where needed. Answers by each respondent were compared and contrasted with the answers of the other respondents regarding the same topics and subject matter. This method helped to determine some generalizations among gangs in Los Angeles County, as well as to discover some nuances and diversity with regard to gang organizational structure, terminology, and tendencies. The "Findings/Discussion" sections of this paper correspond to issues in the literature section in terms of findings from the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study recognizes that preadolescence and adolescence is reflective with reference to earlier child development during the years prior to gang recruitment and membership. Because of this, the study gives information that may be useful in targeting youth with interventions before boys make the decision to join gangs.

Age of members

The subjects in this study were African American males and Latino gang members in Los Angeles County. In an interview with Watts area gang member, here referred to as Roy, he stated that, the older members who were recruited to the gang between 11 and 13 years old were easier to "teach" and had a greater propensity to adhere to gang norms when under pressure to denounce their gang ties in the presence of rival gang members, or while being interrogated by law enforcement. Roy further stated,

'If they start late [in adolescence], they are more likely to tell what they know and cooperate with police, or not follow the code of the streets. It's because guys that turn [to gangs] after high school are not really experienced. When a younger member passes these kinds of tests from junior high to his early 20s, he gains a name for himself, and has a reputation to protect.'

According to Roy in this excerpt, as well as other gang members in the study, he stated show that though the ages for being gang affiliated is often between 15 and 30 years of age, youth that join gangs and are recruited at the younger end of the spectrum seem to be more street savvy. Roy himself became a gang member fairly early. By age 10 his father was in prison and then murdered by gang members once he was released. His mother was drug addicted, leaving Roy to fend for himself in the low-income housing area of the Watts' projects in southeast Los Angeles.

One case in point was that of Eddy one of the Mexican gang members interviewed from a gang called "JFK" which were the initials for "Just Fucking Killers." Eddy

stated that his older brother and much of his extended family were gang members and that he knew at some point he would be a gang member. He said that he was identified by other children in the neighborhood as a gang member simply because of his family members' reputation as ruthless gang members. He stated he knew by age 8 that at some point he would have to become a "man" and live up to his family's reputation. He not only expressed pride in his current reputation as a JFK member, but enjoyed the violence that is the hallmark of street gang membership. Eddy had connected gang membership with manhood, and therefore sees his membership as part of his masculine identity. It is important to note how early he developed his conception of manhood. Eddy stated that "... all I knew was gangs, it's just the way it was, I always knew that I would be from somewhere [a gang].

Family impact

Eddy's family life was plagued with neurotic tension. His parents, as Eddy explained, had minimal to no control over what he and his older brother Jose chose to do with their time. Therefore, much time was spent with the gang committing violent acts against rival gang members, much of which, according to Eddy, was gun violence. He also mentioned that his father was a chronic alcoholic and their household was in continual turmoil. Their parents were very low-income wage earners, and were first generation immigrants from Mexico. Eddy said that he was profoundly affected by his family life situation and the accompanying frustration and anxiety, and therefore turned whole heartedly to gang activity. He also stated that he was so dedicated to violence that he performed a walk-up shooting as his initiation into the gang, though there were several less violent ways to join.

Neuroticism and the family

It was quite clear from the interviews that there had been a progression from neurotic issues in the families in early childhood to oppositional defiance before age 10, conduct disorder issues by ages 11 to 16 and sociopathic behavior from age 17 onward. This characteristic pattern and its criteria is clearly outlined from a categorical perspective in the DSM-IV-TR. There was clear hierarchical development from ODD to CD and subsequently to antisocial personality disorder with each gang member interviewed. Each gang affiliated subject elaborated upon, and confirmed these symptoms and characteristics, and expressed deep-seated frustrations in early childhood (prior to 10 years old). In addition, each gang member (and the reformed members interviewed) attributed their feelings directly to unstable home lives. TC, the reformed gang member, who is now a intervention

specialist, said he initially joined to have fun. He mentioned that though both parents worked, his home life was full of frustration and anger that stemmed from the family unit which led to conduct issues in school and “run-ins” with police. His statements match those of the other gang affiliated respondents, especially those of Joseph. Joseph (whose life issues will be discussed in more detail later), mentioned in his interview, that his mother’s emotional disposition and behavior towards he and his brother became one of “complete irritability” after their father was no longer in the home. He stated that he attributed her change directly to his father leaving her.

Each of the gang members in this study stated that the primary support during these times in their earlier lives came from their gang. This was also expressed by the teachers and the counselors in the study. Though they received support from the gang, respondents said that it was conditioned upon their adherence to gang norms and values; hence, they were alternative and non-conformist, set against conventional norms and socialization. Subjects in this study showed significant social dysfunction as early as 7 years old, based on their own self-reports. The potential gang member initially, is a product of the family. Therefore, early family interaction and inter-relationship, ego development and ultimately identity development are the starting point in understanding why boys may be predisposed to the lure of a neighborhood gang. It is important to note that gang recruiters and socializers are particularly attuned to potential members’ frustrations and perceived need for acceptance, recognition, friendship, and desire to belong to a respected group. They also recognize the level of the potential’s desperation in this regard and how willing the child is to commit violent and delinquent acts to achieve peer group acceptance and recognition, given their dysfunctional home life.

Home Life, ODD and CD

Given the importance of the family, as mentioned earlier, the evolution from family through to a boy’s entry into the school and neighborhood environment is important in understanding children who join gangs. In the lives of study respondents it was clear that the potential for oppositional defiance (ODD), conduct disorder (CD) and the acting out of frustrations due to home life were increased by lack of consistent normative family interaction. Respondents showed a distinct ODD/CD progression from issues originating from family life. Roy’s father was absent, and his cocaine-addicted mother was preoccupied with obtaining drugs, making her unable to be consistent with the most basic child-rearing activity and supervision. In the case of Andre, a close relative (uncle) constantly introduced him to street violence without his mother’s outward disapproval. With regard to Joseph, his mother’s constant irritation and his father’s

absence provided sufficient instability of home life to cause frustration and contribute to he and his brother’s deviant behavior in childhood. Each of the respondents reported frustration, anger, hostility, and deviant behavior which continued throughout their childhood. The school environment not only places the child in a context with other children where there is increased autonomy with regard to behaviors where the child is expected to perform appropriately in an environment with another type of authority figure, namely, teachers and school administrators. For example, Roy stated that he slept and ate his meals at various apartment units of gang members who sometimes gave him money to eat. He was involved with the gang most of his life and is now 32 years old and currently active in his gang. He has been shot, and shot at, numerous times by rival gangs as well as being the shooter in attacks on rivals. Roy’s home life and neighborhood life was often one in the same. Roy, like each of the veteran members in this study has been a shooter when called upon by the gang. He reported extreme anxiety, frustration, and hostility, and aggressive behavior since nine years of age. Roy was well within reach of community intervention, yet he was not identified as being at-risk. Roy stated that he seldom attended school, and when he did he was tardy. He said that he spent most of his time outside of the school bullying other children and taking their lunch money and other belongings. He talked about this as a time when he was learning the “code of the streets” that is, he said, “you gotta be tough, to be a man.”

In an interview with Joseph, a veteran Crip gang member, he described what his life was like as a 7 year old. He mentioned that he and his younger brother who was 6 years old had their father in the home. However, at around the time he turned seven years old his father moved in with a woman on the same city block and had children with her, while he and his brother were left to live with their mother. Joseph explained how this devastated him and that the how feelings of abandonment was on his mind constantly. He stated that as the years went by he would see his father almost daily, since they lived so close in proximity. Joseph mentioned his father never visited with them nor allowed he and his brother to come to the father’s his residence.

Joseph spoke of several instances where his father would not stop to talk to he and his brother when the father drove by. He mentioned the few times that his father did stop and speak to them as they played outside, that he made promises to visit them or take them for car rides with him that he never kept. He stated that their father stopped once and gave them both one dollar and left. Joseph stated that he would see his father taking Christmas presents out of the car for his other children while they received nothing for Christmas. Joseph said that it hurt him very badly. He mentioned that as he got older the inner pain was with him every day and that he and his brother were unsupervised by their mother

because she worked late. He had begun to associate with boys in the neighborhood that were in gangs and participated in delinquent activities such as defacing property, bullying non gang members, and missing classes at school to spend time with the local gang members.

By the time Joseph was 12 he had joined the Crip gang and was known as a "lil loc" which is one of the gangs hierarchal designations. He explained that the lowest rank was baby loc which was a gang member usually 11 years old or younger, a "lil loc" was usually about 12 to 14 years old and locs were about 16 years old and up to about 20 years old, while the regular members called "Locs," that is, if the gang felt they had committed delinquent acts that qualified them as "locs." "Loc" is a term that stood for loco or crazy in Spanish. This term was used even though the Crips are a Black gang. At the top of the ranking he said were "OGs" which designated a "Original Gangsta" which were the veteran members who had been through the rigors of gang membership and committed crimes, had several stints in jail or prison, and were usually 25 or older.

Joseph described how a 31-year old veteran gang member began taking him to parties where he met older girls, smoked marijuana, and drank alcohol. He said that it made him feel like he was "on top of the world." He gained a reputation in the neighborhood as being "gangsta" because he was accepted by the gang and could therefore "hang out" with various members. Many of them sold drugs and had money and cars.

Joseph stated they did many things to make him feel like part of the family so he joined the gang. Camaraderie was developed by doing delinquent acts, drinking together and just "hanging out." But as time went on, he said that he was expected to commit delinquent acts from vandalism and fighting rival gang members, to drive-by shooting. The researcher asked Joseph how the gang was able to get he and other boys to go so far as shooting someone. He described how there would be a car of about 4 members and one of the veteran members would turn the gangsta-rap genre of music up loud, drink alcohol, and smoke marijuana in the car. The veteran member would later drive to an area where a rival gang congregated or find a rival alone and, then give one of the younger members a gun. The younger member was given instructions to shoot when they drove past the crowd of rivals, or in the instance of a lone rival, they were told to get out of the car and shoot the rival member and that the car would wait for him around the corner. When asked by this researcher why he did as requested, he stated that "there was so much pressure to do it." The atmosphere of the loud gangsta rap music and the drugs and alcohol made him and other younger members feel energized to commit shootings and other crimes.

Another interview participant, a veteran gang member from a Blood gang whom we will here refer to as Andre, mentioned his experience as starting from age 8, when

his adult uncle would take he and his brother to forcibly take money from drug addicts in the neighborhood, usually by violence. Andre mentioned that he enjoyed going out with his uncle to collect money in this way, and as he became involved in the local gang at age 10 he was well acquainted with violence and would extort money from other children at school. He stated that he was delinquent prior to joining the gang, and that his level of violence increased after joining the gang. He stated that his reason for joining and remaining in the gang was his love of the violence. Andre had been on numerous drive-by shootings and on one occasion was shot several times himself (pulling up his shirt showing the researcher the scars of the encounter).

Conclusion

This study recognizes that preadolescence and adolescence is reflective with reference to earlier child development during the years prior to gang recruitment and membership. Because of this, the study gives information that may be useful in targeting youth with interventions before boys make the decision to join gangs. Though much research has been published emphasizing the ecological perspective regarding street gangs, more focus needs to be placed on the person-environment solutions to issues of childhood anxiety, depression and proactive aggressive behaviors. Because the family is the matrix of the developing child, and entry into school is a major change in the child's introduction into the neighborhood environment, more emphasis should be placed on psychosocial development in early phases of the boy's life. Since street gangs present a salient opportunity for alternative socialization and development of nonconformist attitudes, social programs need to be developed to identify high-risk children and curtail their path toward gang membership. Much research, documentation and successful treatments have been developed for oppositional defiant and conduct disordered children that utilizes parent training in combination with other therapeutic techniques. Gang proliferation depends on a steady flow of children moving through the early childhood and adolescent stages of psychosocial development. By identifying children with ODD and CD tendencies, the problem of gang membership can be alleviated. The answer should not be placed squarely in the hands of law enforcement nor should assistance to children start at adolescence only. Though violence, proactive aggression and delinquency is inherently a legal issue and often manifests in a boys adolescent years, legal actions and involvement with law enforcement can be prevented by educating parents and teachers on how to recognize troubled youth and by making social workers and psychologists more accessible to parents and school personnel. In addition, community based agencies that work with these youth

should be funded through government programs, foundations, and private donations and assisted by schools to combat the problem. Schools have the children and the available space to furnish space for afterschool programs. Collaboration between parents, schools, professional social workers, and community agencies is vital for identification and child early intervention. Further studies should focus not just on adolescent interaction with the gang populated environment, but should emphasize the evolution of the child's disposition and frustration stemming from neuroticism in family life in combination with the gang populated pathogenic environment in which he is reared.

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