

Gang-Involved African American Youth: An Overview

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Although only 1–2 percent of youth are actively involved in street gangs (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), gang-affiliated youth are responsible for a disproportionately large percentage of serious and violent delinquent acts (Fagan, 1989; Gatti, Temblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Howell, 1998; Huff, 1998; Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004). Gang members are more likely than their nongang, high-risk counterparts to possess highly lethal weapons, sell illicit drugs, and engage in a wide array of other criminal behaviors ranging from petty theft to homicide (Huff, 1998; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1997; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). Gang youth also experience greater school failure, life stress, mental health difficulties (e.g., depression, PTSD), and other psychosocial problems (Anderson & Snart, 1999; Harper & Robinson, 1999; Li, Stanton et al., 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003; Tome, 1993). Unfortunately, the negative consequences of youth gang involvement often persist into adulthood. By age 21, former gang members are much more likely to report being unemployed, receiving welfare, committing crime, or carrying a gun than their same-age counterparts who never joined a gang (Thornberry et al., 2003).

From a public health perspective, the most significant consequence of gang membership is violence—gang membership exposes youth to dramatically increased risk of violence perpetration, violence exposure, injury, and death (Hamrin, Jonker, & Scahill, 2004; Howell, 1998). Since the late 1970s, the proportion of homicides that are gang-related have increased substantially in Los Angeles County (Hutson, Anglin, Kyriacou, Hart, & Spears, 1995; Maxson & Klein, 2001; Tita & Abrahamse, 2004), so that gangs now account for more than 50 percent of homicides in that county (Garvey & Winton, 2003; Hale, 2001; Leovy, 2003). Gang members are also much more likely to witness violent death.

For example, a survey of Detroit gang members found that 36 percent had the experience of losing someone close to them from a homicide, and 35 percent had actually observed someone dead following a gang homicide (Shelden et al., 2001).

Because African Americans and Latinos are overrepresented among gang youth (Egley, 2002; Esbensen & Winfree, 2001; Howell, 1998; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Shelden et al., 2001; Winton, 2005), not surprisingly, exposure to gang-related violence has a disproportionate impact on minority youth. African American and Latino youth are most often the victims and perpetrators of gang violence (Poe-Yamagata & Jones 2000) and gang-related homicides (Aryan, Jandial, Bennett, Masri, Lavine & Levy, 2005; Pizarro & McGloin, 2006; Tita & Abrahamse, 2004).

This chapter gives a brief overview of the research on youth street gangs, with a focus on gang-involved, African American males. We address the prevalence of gang involvement among African American youth, and why and how young males join and leave gangs. The psychosocial sequelae of gang involvement will also be discussed, particularly the possible "causal" links to criminal behavior. Finally, the limited research on gang interventions will be discussed, particularly in relation to African American youth.

WHAT IS A YOUTH STREET GANG?

There is much debate among scholars and policymakers regarding the defining characteristics of youth gangs (Bjerregaard, 2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Although some identify territorial attachment, collective signs or symbols, and group hierarchy as critical elements, most definitions require that the gang adopt some form of criminal orientation (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Short, 1996). Recently, a collaborative group of American and European gang scholars took this approach when defining a youth gang as any "durable, street-oriented youth group whose *involvement in illegal activity* is part of their group identity" (Klein & Maxson, 2006). This "Eurogang" definition has several benefits. First, it emphasizes the youth orientation of most gangs and thus omits adult-oriented criminal groups such as prison gangs or terrorist organizations. Second, it distinguishes youth gangs from other youth groups such as school or church clubs, which are generally not engaged in illegal activities (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Finally, this definition reflects the greater proclivity for gang youth to engage in antisocial behavior (Curry, 2000; Esbensen et al., 2008; Thornberry et al., 2003). For example, Esbensen et al. (2008) found that 98 percent of self-described gang members in their sample reported committing one or more delinquent acts in the prior three months, and nearly one-third reported a prior arrest.

However, there are at least two potential disadvantages to the Eurogang definition. First, despite the link between gang membership and antisocial behavior,

this definition could inadvertently reinforce exaggerated public perceptions of gang youth as violent and dangerous (Pryor & McGarrell, 1993; Zimmerman et al., 2006). Although, gangs are indeed responsible for a large share of homicides in cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles (Egley and Ritz, 2006), gangs actually account for a small and shrinking percentage of violent crime nationwide (Harrell, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Second, this approach may over-identify black gangs compared to white and Hispanic gangs. For example, using the "Eurogang" definition, Esbensen et al. (2008) found that 67 percent of black youth agreed that their group was a "gang," compared to only 43 percent of Hispanics, 36 percent of multiracial respondents, and 15 percent of whites.

Although some studies described in this chapter adopt the Eurogang approach, in practice, scholars operationalize gang membership in many different ways. Generally, approaches differ with respect to time frame (e.g., "currently" vs. "ever" a member), group characteristics (e.g., criminal orientation vs. gang-related signs/symbols vs. none required), and informant (e.g., self-report vs. law enforcement records).

YOUTH GANG PREVALENCE

Gang prevalence estimates range widely from 1 percent to 27 percent (Klein & Maxson, 2006), with most surveys suggesting a lower prevalence. For example, a large survey of U.S. youth (ages 12–16 years) indicates that 5 percent reported ever belonging to a gang, and only 2 percent reported gang membership in the past year (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Not surprisingly, surveys show that most gang members are male; however, current estimates range from a low of 64 percent male (Esbensen & Winfree 2001) to a high of 94 percent male (National Youth Gang Survey [NYGS], 2009). Similarly, the typical age of gang members varies dramatically across studies; law enforcement estimates show that two-thirds of gang members are adults, whereas self-report studies show that gang membership peaks during mid-adolescence and then declines rapidly (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Black youth join gangs significantly more often than white youth, and rates for Hispanics are closer to African Americans than to whites (Snyder & Sickman, 2006). Yet prevalence disparities vary dramatically as a function of reporting source. Ethnographic studies, news accounts, and law enforcement data often cultivate the image that youth gangs are composed almost exclusively of African American and Latino urban youth (Egley et al., 2006; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). For example, a 2006 national survey of law enforcement agencies (NYGS, 2009) showed that more than 90 percent of gang members in the United States were ethnic minorities, with 35 percent identified as African American and 49 percent Latino. Based on this survey and 2000 census figures, Greene and Pranis (2007) estimated that African Americans and Latinos were

approximately 15 times more likely than Whites to be identified as gang members by police. More dramatically, in the 1990s, the Los Angeles district attorney's office issued a report stating that 47 percent of all black males in the county between the ages of 21 and 24 were entered in the county's gang database (Reiner, 1992, cited in Klein & Maxson, 2006), which suggests an extreme level of overidentification of African American males as potential gang members.

By contrast, household and school-based youth surveys suggest a dramatically different demographic profile for gang youth. Results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) indicate that 42 percent of gang members are white, 27 percent black, and 24 percent Latino (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). Similarly, Esbensen and Osgood (1997) found that 25 percent of gang youth were white, 25 percent Hispanic, and 31 percent African American. Thus, self-report data on gang membership shows a much higher representation of white youth.

We see an interesting contrast between law enforcement prevalence data (based on the NYGS) and self-report data (based on the NLSY, a nationally representative household sample). The greatest disparity is apparent for white youth, who make up only 8 percent of gang youth according to law enforcement but 42 percent based on self-report. Second, compared to self-report, law enforcement identifies a much greater percentage of black and Hispanic youth as gang members. Law enforcement data often includes older, inner-city, predominantly ethnic minority males who are mostly familiar to police officers. By contrast, school/household surveys include *self-identified* gang youth in their early to mid-teens whose gender and ethnic backgrounds tend to parallel local communities (Curry, 2000).

Greene and Pranis (2007) give three possible explanations for the disparity between law enforcement and youth survey accounts of gang involvement. The first is that many self-identified gang youth are either peripheral members or "fronters" who adopt the gang label but not the antisocial gang lifestyle, and thus rarely come to the attention of law enforcement. In this scenario, the large number of white gang members who emerge in youth surveys are actually "wannabes" rather than authentic gang members. However, data from Esbensen and colleagues (Esbensen & Winfrey, 2001; Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen et al., 2008) argue against this explanation, at least with regard to young gang members. They found that: (1) intensity of gang membership was associated with increases in self-reported delinquency, including property offenses and drug sales; (2) white and non-white gang youth were equally likely to engage in delinquent behavior, although there were some differences in offending profiles (Esbensen et al., 2008); and (3) white gang youth were just as likely as black and Latino gang youth to report being core members of a delinquent gang. Moreover, data by Curry (2000) suggests that self-reported gang membership is a valid predictor of self-reported delinquency and future contact with law enforcement. Thus, it is unlikely that potential differences in the behaviors of white and black

gang youth fully explain ethnic disparities in survey versus law enforcement prevalence.

A second possibility is that the makeup of gang members changes dramatically between the early adolescent years captured by youth surveys and the late adolescent years captured by law enforcement data (Greene & Pranis, 2007). In other words, white youth may be much more likely than black or Latino youth to "drop out" of the gang lifestyle during the transition to adulthood. Survey data offers some limited evidence that white youth may "mature out" of gangs more quickly than minority youth (Greene & Pranis, 2007). This might occur, in part, because jobs are more available to white youth compared to black youth (Pager, 2007; Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2008), and employment is shown to reduce gang cohesion and facilitate the transition from gang life (Klein, 1971; Spergel, 1990; Vigil, 1988). However, this account is not a sufficient explanation. Using data from the NLSY study, Greene and Pranis (2007) show that even if every self-identified white gang member terminated their gang involvement by age 17, the number of white gang youth would still far exceed the number identified by law enforcement. Thus, another explanation is needed to clarify the gaping race disparity in self versus law enforcement reports of gang involvement.

The final possibility is that law enforcement data is biased in such a way as to overrepresent Black and Latino youth and/or underrepresent white youth as gang involved. This bias might stem from geographic differences in the ethnic makeup of youth gangs in the United States or in policing patterns (e.g., police consolidated in high-crime, mostly minority neighborhoods). Data from the NYGC shows that ethnic differences in gang prevalence vary by region, and this may help shape law enforcement impressions of who gang youth are. White gang youth are much more likely to reside in majority white suburbs and rural areas than urban regions, whereas the reverse is generally true for Hispanic gang youth, and to a lesser extent black gang youth (NYGC, 2009). Greene and Pranis (2007) argue that rural/suburban and urban law enforcement agencies face different challenges with respect to detecting and tracking gang activity. Because rural/suburban agencies may not recognize gang activity and lack the resources to establish and maintain gang databases, they may undercount the white gang youth who are more likely to live in these regions. By contrast, urban law enforcement agencies frequently track gang membership, but their databases are generally unreliable because standards for entering individuals into databases, or expunging those who are no longer active, are lax, and frequent changes in agency recording practices produce year-to-year fluctuations in gang prevalence (Greene & Pranis, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2006). The methodological challenges faced by urban and rural/suburban agencies leave open the possibility that law enforcement will succumb to prevailing stereotypes regarding who gang members are (e.g., urban, criminally involved minorities).

GANG JOINING

So why do youth join street gangs? No one factor predominates, and single influences explain very little in terms of gang joining. Indeed, research identifies numerous risk factors for gang joining that cluster along five primary domains including influences at the level of the individual (e.g., early drug use, antisocial beliefs), family (e.g., single-parent household, parental supervision), peer group (e.g., delinquent peer affiliation, early dating), school (e.g., low school attachment, low academic achievement), and community/neighborhood (e.g., neighborhood crime, gang presence in community). These broad explanatory factors are found to either: (1) correlate with gang membership, (2) predict future gang joining, or (3) distinguish youth who join gangs from those who do not (Esbensen et al., 2008; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001; Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003).

Moreover, multiple studies show that these risks are cumulative in their impact on gang joining (Hill et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003). For example, Hill et al. (2001) found that compared to "no-risk" youth, "low-risk" youth (i.e., 2–3 risks) were 3 times more likely to join a gang, "medium-risk" youth (i.e., 4–6 risks) were 5 times more likely to join, and "high-risk" youth (i.e., 7 or more risks) were 13 times more likely to join. Similarly, Thornberry et al. (2003) found that 61 percent of male youth who experienced simultaneous "risk" in 7 different life domains eventually joined gangs. As Greene and Pranis (2007) state, generally "gang members are youth for whom everything is going wrong" (p. 46).

Thus, gang youth experience a host of psychosocial disadvantages, with gang joining associated with problems across multiple life domains. The literature strongly suggests a multidimensionality of risk factors that propel youth toward gang membership. Curry and Spergel (1988) argue that compared to the unstable life circumstances faced by many urban, disadvantaged youth, "the gang is responsive and provides quasi-stable, efficient, meaningful social, and perhaps economic, structures" (p. 401). For high-risk youth with low attachment to conventional mores, gang membership may provide financial gain (albeit illicit) and a sense of belonging, as well as opportunities for social identity and peer status (Curry & Spergel, 1988).

Although these factors may pertain to gang youth more generally, what does the research say about gang-joining risk for African American youth in particular? When youth were asked about the reasons they joined a gang, Thornberry et al. (2003) found both similarities and differences across ethnic groups. African Americans were most likely to say they joined because of Family/Friend influence (59 percent; "my brother was in the posse") and for Protection (19 percent; "protection of friends' joint"). Similarly, whites were most likely to join because of Family/Friends (63 percent) and for Other reasons (29 percent; "Just to be in it").

Hispanic youth joined for Fun/Action (37 percent; "Something to do"), Family/Friends (26 percent), and Protection (22 percent). Thus, this data suggests that family and friends may play a stronger role in gang joining for black and white youth, compared to Hispanic youth.

However, when family factors are disaggregated from peer and other contextual influences, the circumstances leading to gang joining become less clear for African American youth, particularly when compared with other ethnic groups. Esbensen et al. (2008) found that whereas white youth in two-parent households reported lower gang membership than whites in single-parent homes, this pattern was reversed for African American youth, who reported the *lowest levels of gang membership in single-parent homes* and the highest levels in two-parent homes. Using data from the NLSY, Vazquez (2006) found that affiliation with "negative peers" predicted gang involvement for black youth but not Hispanic or white youth; by contrast, having siblings in a gang predicted gang involvement for Hispanic and white youth but not for black youth. These two studies suggest that for African American youth, family dynamics may play a counterintuitive role as a causal influence for gang joining, or may be mostly irrelevant.

Yet other work suggests that family-based variables, along with other contextual factors, are indeed important determinants of gang involvement for African American youth. Cross-sectional research shows that gang involvement among African American youth is primarily associated with social, interpersonal, and parenting variables (e.g., presence of gang members in the school or home, parent attachment and control), whereas gang involvement is associated primarily with interpersonal variables (e.g., self-esteem and education frustration) and family socialization among Latino youth (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Smith & Krohn, 1995). Li et al. (2002) found that low parental monitoring predicted whether or not African American youth joined gangs. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2003) found that African American gang members, compared to their nongang counterparts, were less likely to report that their neighborhood was safe and that parents provided adequate structure at home. Furthermore, research with African American and Hispanic females (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001) suggested that gangs appeared to shield the youth from unsatisfactory home environments and provide a means of survival in neighborhoods with high levels of criminal and gang activity. For these youth, peer (i.e., not losing friends) and interpersonal (i.e., a sense of belonging or status) factors also made gang membership appealing (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001).

These quantitative findings are consistent with Vigil's (2002) ethnographic work with African American gangs in Los Angeles. Vigil (2002) identified several reasons why youth joined gangs, including having a family member or older role model in the gang. Pressure from other neighborhood youth was another reason; youth did not want to be ostracized from their neighborhood peers for not joining. Often youth would join a gang to "be known" or to fulfill their

self-esteem. Also, with few economic opportunities available in their communities, youth saw the gang as a way to earn money through the drug trade or other illicit activity. Vigil explains that the reasons why youth join reflect how street socialization has prevailed over other conventional institutions of socialization, such as schools.

So, to what degree do these multiple risks factors actually explain the greater propensity of African American youth to join gangs relative to white youth? Thornberry et al. (2003) addressed this question in a longitudinal study of high-risk middle school students in Rochester, New York. For adolescent males, they found that interpersonal and contextual factors partially mediated the effects of African American ethnicity on gang joining. Specifically, poor school performance, early dating, delinquent beliefs, early involvement in violent behavior, and greater life stressors partially explained why young African American males were more likely to join gangs than young white males. Similar effects were found for Latino youth (predominantly Puerto Rican), but results were not as robust.

In summary, there is no one factor that determines gang joining for African American youth, but rather many influences that form a cumulative risk. Moreover, ethnic differences in gang joining may be mostly explained by the greater prevalence of risk factors among African American and Latino youth. However, several caveats should be noted. First, youth with cumulative risks are not predestined to become gang members, and the majority of high-risk youth never join gangs (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Second, despite the initial attraction of gang life for many youth, the tenure of most youth in gangs is actually quite brief. The next section will address the issue of youth gang persistence and exodus.

GANG PERSISTENCE AND DESISTENCE

Contrary to the stereotype of gang membership as a lifelong commitment, current research shows gang membership to be a transitory state for most (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003; Vigil, 1988). Longitudinal studies show that many youth move in and out of gangs and that length of membership averages one to two years or less (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hill et al., 2003; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003). In addition, gang participation rapidly increases in early adolescence and gradually declines in early adulthood (Seals, 2007), similar to the pattern of delinquency across the lifespan (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). Moreover, longitudinal research by Thornberry et al. (2003) shows no ethnic differences in length of gang membership; generally, African American youth are no more likely to be stable, long-term gang members than white or Hispanic youth.

Unfortunately, few empirical studies have focused on the process of leaving a gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006). However, in-depth

interviews and ethnographic observation of ex-gang members have captured the process of gang desistance (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Moore, 1991; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil, 1988), and give us insight into what motivates youth to leave gangs. For instance, Vigil (1988) describes gang exodus as a process of *maturing out* of a gang through a series of gradual steps related to new commitments and responsibilities (Vigil, 1988). Additional studies (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil, 1988) argue for gang-related victimization, family concerns, and employment barriers as reasons for leaving the gang.

As a potential intervention target, employment may be the most promising of these maturational factors. Naturalistic studies show that employment is one way that even established gang members are able to terminate their gang affiliations. For example, a longitudinal study of Chicano gang members in Los Angeles found that a productive job was the single most effective strategy for "making it" in the barrio and minimizing future involvement with gangs and antisocial behavior (Moore, 1991). By supplying income to stave off poverty, facilitating the development of important interpersonal and life skills, and promoting contact with prosocial peers and coworkers, employment may interfere with or compete with gang-related behavior and can provide "cover" for gradually disengaging from gang life (Klein, 1971; Reiner, 1992).

In interviews with African American gang leaders in Milwaukee, Hagedorn (1998) found that "maturing out" of a gang through stable employment was often not feasible as jobs for urban African American youth were limited. He described this as a "structural narrowing" of the means for urban African American youth to leave a gang and the delinquent lifestyle (Hagedorn, 1998). In a study examining the life-course stability of antisocial behavior, Elliot (1994) found that twice as many African American as white youth persist in violent offending through early adulthood. However, Elliot (1994) found no racial differences in violence continuity for 18- to 20-year-olds who were employed or living with a spouse/partner, suggesting that transitioning to responsible adult roles is a particularly strong contributor to crime/violence desistance for African Americans. While Elliot's (1994) study was not focused on gang members, it provides some support for the pattern that Hagedorn (1998) identified in his ethnographic study of African American street gangs.

This line of research has important implications for gang intervention work, as it points toward variables such as employment or cohabitation with a responsible partner that may be critical to accelerating the process of "maturing out" of gang life and reinforcing gang desistance.

PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF YOUTH GANG INVOLVEMENT

Earlier, we noted that gang membership is a significant predictor of serious and violent crime, violence victimization, and a host of other negative life

outcomes. In the Rochester longitudinal study (Thornberry et al., 2003), gang members made up only 30 percent of the study sample but accounted for 63 percent of all delinquent acts, 82 percent of serious delinquency, 70 percent of drug sales, and 54 percent of all arrests. Results from the Denver Youth Survey showed that 72 percent of youth gang members reported being involved in serious assaults compared to 20 percent of nonmembers with highly delinquent peers (Huizinga, 1995, cited by Thornberry et al., 1998). Moreover, gang involvement dramatically increases one's risk for violence exposure and injury. Youth are far more likely to be violently victimized while in a gang than when they are not participating (Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007), and participation in gang fights triples the odds of serious injury (Loeber, Kalb, & Huizinga, 2001). The latter point is particularly ironic given that protection and self-defense loom large as reasons youth give for joining gangs (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

However, a key theoretical question is whether gang membership truly facilitates deviant behavior (i.e., "gang facilitation"), or rather that gangs simply attract youth who are already inclined to act in a deviant manner (i.e., "gang selection"). The facilitation model argues that processes intrinsic to gang membership actually *cause* deviant behaviors, whereas the selection model argues that gangs have no causal role on delinquency or other deviant behaviors (Thornberry et al., 2003; Klein & Maxson, 2006). If the gang facilitation model is correct, then 1) gang members should show higher levels of antisocial behavior during periods of active membership compared with pre- or post-membership, 2) gang members should evidence more antisocial behavior than nonmembers, and 3) gang membership should predict negative life outcomes over the course of time. By contrast, if the gang selection model is true, offending patterns will be consistently high before, during, and after periods of active gang membership.

Although the evidence is somewhat mixed (Klein & Maxson, 2006), research mostly supports a gang facilitation explanation. Longitudinal studies show that youth are significantly more involved in violence, drug sales, illegal gun use, and miscellaneous crime during periods of active gang membership (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003). Moreover, gang youth account for a much larger share of delinquent behavior than nonmembers (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003), even when nonmembers have the same density of delinquent peers in their social networks (Thornberry et al., 2003). Finally, stable (vs. short-term) gang membership increases the odds of later becoming a teenage father, impregnating a girl, dropping out of school, unstable employment, experiencing multiple life transitions, and being arrested (Thornberry et al., 2003).

How is it that gang involvement, *per se*, promotes such outcomes? One explanation is that gangs, in multiple ways, amplify group processes that encourage antisocial behavior (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003). First,

gang members can hinder the youth's progress by monopolizing his social affiliations and activities, and limiting access to prosocial networks and opportunities (Thornberry et al., 2003). Second, the image that gang youth often cultivate to fit into the gang (e.g., tattoos, dress, demeanor, crime) may reinforce an "oppositional" identity and hamper their ability to adapt to conventional settings (Moore & Vigil, 1987; Ogbu, 1981). Third, gangs appear to promote weak school attachment, low school participation, less educational attainment, low academic achievement, and school failure (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Seals, 2007), which severely constrains the vocational opportunities available to these youth (Spergel, 2005). Fourth, given the antisocial orientation of most gangs, the high levels of unstructured socializing, and group reinforcement for delinquent attitudes and behaviors, the gang may simply offer more opportunities and encouragement to engage in delinquent behavior than the youth would have on his own (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Finally, despite efforts at gang disengagement, police, rival gangs, and other community members may continue to treat the youth as an active gang member (e.g., police may "harass" youth), and thus limit his ability to secure legitimate employment or otherwise engage in conventional pursuits (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Thus, prolonged gang involvement can reinforce antisocial attitudes and behaviors, limit conventional social networks and activities, disrupt normative developmental trajectories, and ultimately foreclose on future opportunities. In turn, antisocial behavior and other nonconventional activities can further reinforce gang cohesion and identity (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

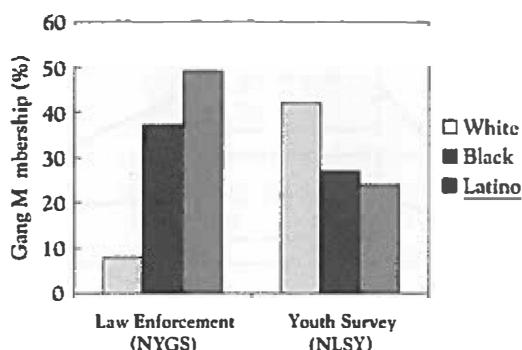
However, the relevant issue here is whether the consequences of gang membership are more or less severe for black youth than for youth of other ethnic backgrounds. More specifically, does gang involvement facilitate more antisocial behavior among African American youth compared to white youth? Two studies by Esbensen and colleagues (Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen et al., 2008) show mixed results. In the first study, Esbensen et al. (2001) found that, for the most part, white and black gang youth were equally likely to engage in delinquent behavior, and that "core" gang membership was equally prevalent for black and white youth. In a later descriptive survey, however, Esbensen et al. (2008) found potential areas of difference with respect to delinquent behavior and ethnicity among gang youth. Although delinquency rates were mostly similar across ethnic groups, 1) white gang youth showed lower violent offending compared to black and Hispanic members, and 2) black gang youth reported the highest levels of drug selling and weapons carrying, but the *lowest* property offending and arrest rates. They also found that "territoriality" was more characteristic of black (67 percent) and Hispanic (54 percent) gang members than of white (42 percent) and multiracial (46 percent) gang members, and that minority gang members were less likely to let others into their territory. Thus, depending on the outcomes of interest, the negative consequences of gang membership are greater, lesser, or equal for black versus white youth.

INTERVENTION

So, given the factors that facilitate gang joining and delinquency, and the presumed mechanisms through which youth exit gangs, what is the optimal way to intervene with African American gang youth? Despite the fairly rich literature on gang processes and dynamics and the proliferation of gang programs, most gang-focused interventions are not informed by this research but rather by conventional wisdom and anecdotal evidence (Klein & Maxson, 2006). This may be one reason why the limited research shows that efforts to reduce gang involvement and gang-related crime are mixed at best (Braga, Kennedy, & Tita, 2002; Chaskin, 2010; Goldstein, 1993; Howell, 1998; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Indeed, notwithstanding the clear psychosocial benefits of leaving gangs, many gang control strategies may actually make it *harder* for youth to extricate themselves from gangs because they inadvertently strengthen gang cohesion (Klein & Maxson, 2006). In this section, we briefly summarize promising gang interventions, focusing primarily on the few intervention studies that 1) include desistance-oriented programs that target youth who are already gang involved, 2) directly target factors linked to gang involvement or exodus, and 3) utilize a control or comparison group.

The first three evaluations focus narrowly on individual youth, with minimal attention to targeting community factors (Josi & Sechrest, 1999; McDaniel, 2010; Willman & Snortum, 1982). In the 1980s, a police department in El Monte, California, implemented and evaluated an employment program for predominantly Hispanic (93 percent) gang members (Willman & Snortum, 1982). One hundred intervention youth were matched with 100 control youth on age, sex, ethnicity, and gang membership. The intervention focused on 1) obtaining job leads, 2) contacting youth when there was prospective employment, 3) familiarizing youth with job applications and interviews, and 4) arranging transportation for interviews. Unfortunately, there were no significant group differences in police detentions at a seven-month follow-up (Willman & Snortum, 1982), suggesting that the intervention was ineffective.

In the mid-1990s, Josi and Sechrest (1999) evaluated the effects of "Lifeskills '95," a parole reentry program for juvenile offenders, most of whom were gang involved (81 percent). The 13-week program encouraged positive life skills while promoting self-esteem and self-confidence. Weekly modules focused on substance abuse awareness, employment/vocational training, and self-esteem training, among other topics, with each component designed to correct individual deficiencies that might hinder community integration. The evaluation compared 115 program youth (who were required to attend Lifeskills as a condition of parole) with a control group of 115 parolees (who were not eligible for Lifeskills because they resided outside the geographical area). Forty-five percent of participants were Hispanic, 17 percent white, and 33 percent African

Figure 17.1**Gang Membership Percentage, by Source and Ethnicity**

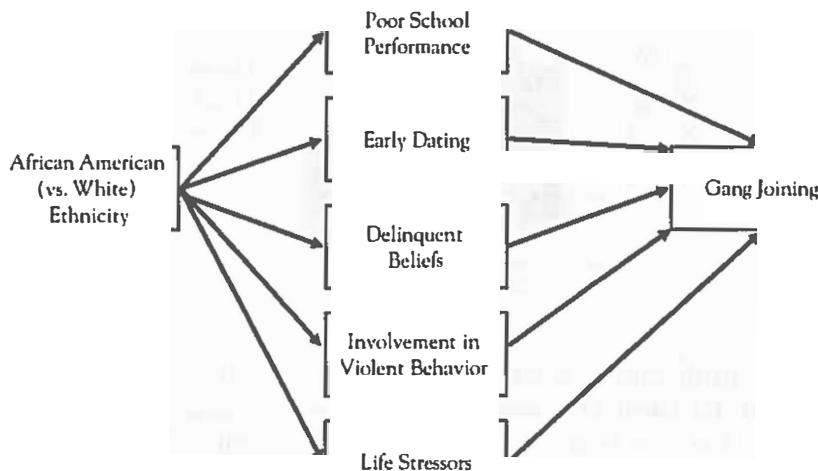
American. By the end of treatment (90 days post-entry), Lifeskills youth were significantly less likely to be rearrested, unemployed, or drug/alcohol abusers. They were also significantly less likely to indicate that they associated "frequently" with former gang peers. Group differences in outcomes were generally maintained at follow-up (Josi & Sechrest, 1999).

In our own work, we assessed the effects of the Behavioral Employment Program (BEP), a skills-based intervention that encourages job readiness, acquisition, and maintenance for juvenile gang offenders. BEP youth attend home-based counseling focused on promoting job preparation (e.g., interview training, resume updating), reinforcing job-appropriate behavior (e.g., timeliness, communication skills, proper attire), and addressing miscellaneous barriers to employment success (e.g., drug use/abuse, transportation difficulties). Counselors either match youth with participating employers or help youth engage in their own job search activities. In a pilot evaluation (McDaniel, 2010), twenty-seven gang-involved, juvenile offenders (76 percent Latino, 24 percent African American) were recruited from the Los Angeles Department of Probation and randomly assigned to either BEP or usual probation services (US). Although no association between treatment condition and increased employment was found, BEP led to marginally significant reductions in gang involvement at six-months post-entry ($p < .10$). Moreover, both within-subjects analyses (i.e., pooled time series) and between-subjects analyses (i.e., multiple regression testing) found that increased employment was significantly associated with reductions in gang involvement (McDaniel, 2010).

The two studies that follow are more comprehensive in scope, focusing not only on individual gang members but also on gang organization/dynamics and community factors (Spergel, 2007; Skogan et al., 2008). In the 1990s, the Little Village Gang Project began offering a comprehensive community-wide approach

Figure 17.2.

Mediator Model Explaining Why African American Males are more Likely than White Males to Join Youth Gangs (Adapted from Thornberry et al., 2003).



(referred to as the “Spergel Model”) to intervening with two violent gangs in a predominantly Mexican American, working-class community in Chicago (OJJDP, 2008; Spergel, 2007). The program involved 1) mobilizing public agencies, private agencies, and residents to address the gang problem; 2) use of outreach workers to counsel youth and help youth navigate the school, social services, and criminal justice systems; 3) helping youth access employment, job training, and other social opportunities; 4) helping agencies adopt more effective policies and procedures in response to gangs; and 5) suppression, or the use of law enforcement to hold youth accountable for criminal activities. Using a matched comparison group, Spergel (2007) found that intervention youth had fewer violent-crime and drug arrests, but there were no significant effects on total arrests, property arrests, or other minor crime arrests. Moreover, residents perceived a significant decline in overall gang activity in Little Village during the program period (Office of Juvenile Justice, 2008).

In the late 1990s, the CeaseFire program also began operating in Chicago, with the primary goal of reducing shootings and homicides with 40 of the most violent gangs in the city (Ransford et al., 2010; Skogan et al., 2008). CeaseFire is a community-wide intervention approach with several key components, including: 1) community mobilization and public education to change community norms about violence; 2) outreach to high-risk youth to mediate conflicts, connect youth with appropriate services (e.g., mental health, job-finding

resources, drug/alcohol treatment), and convince youth that continued violence would not be tolerated; 3) involvement of faith leaders to influence the thinking and behavior of the community; and 4) involvement of law enforcement to share information and coordinate enforcement efforts (Kennedy et al., 2001; Ransford et al., 2010; Skogan et al., 2008). Of the 1,300 clients, approximately 70 percent were African American and 26 percent were Hispanic. Ninety percent were involved in gangs and 82 percent experienced at least one prior arrest (Skogan et al., 2008). Evaluation results from 2004 show that reductions in shootings were significantly greater in CeaseFire zones compared with neighboring police beats (i.e., areas with preintervention shooting rates similar to those in CeaseFire zones) (Ransford et al., 2010). Site-specific analyses showed that CeaseFire was associated with reductions in shootings at four sites, killings attributable to gangs at two sites, and reciprocal killings (i.e., in retaliation for earlier events) at four sites, relative to comparison areas (Skogan et al., 2008).

There are several patterns one can discern from five evaluations. First, across studies, intervention outcomes are generally positive, with most showing reductions in either gang involvement, criminal offending, or both outcome domains; only one showed no positive effects (Willman & Snortum, 1982). Second, although the interventions are quite diverse in content and scope, one common factor is that all include some sort of employment-related component. As noted earlier from ethnographic and empirical work, employment acquisition appears to facilitate both exodus from youth gangs and crime desistance. Third, most evaluations were quasiexperimental designs, with only one study using the most rigorous method of experimental design, random assignment (McDaniel, 2010). For this reason, it is possible that intervention effects in most studies were actually due to nonintervention factors. Finally, despite the large number of gang-involved African American youth identified by researchers, most evaluations were conducted with predominantly Latino youth. Thus, although Maxson and Klein (2006) argue that gang processes are generally similar across ethnic groups, we cannot say with confidence that the positive intervention outcomes noted above would apply equally to gang-involved African American youth.

What, then, is the optimal approach for intervening with African American gang youth? There is general agreement among experts that effective gang mitigation requires hybrid models combining some form of suppression and service provision (Tita & Papachristos, 2010). Although gang suppression alone (e.g., selective incarceration of repeat offenders) can work to reduce crime, effects are often short-lived, probably because suppression does not effectively target factors that produce and sustain gangs (Howell, 2010; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Thus, the Spergel Model, CeaseFire Program, or related interventions that include appropriate suppression and youth outreach might be optimal approaches to gang mitigation, regardless of the youth's ethnic background.

Unfortunately, efforts to implement and sustain such comprehensive approaches often fall well short of expectations (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Why? First, maintaining fidelity to the intervention model is often a problem for complex, comprehensive models. Some of the many fidelity challenges identified by gang researchers include the following: (1) hybrid programs that are initially balanced in focus often drift toward disproportionate emphasis on deterrence; (2) collaboration across diverse agencies is often difficult to initiate and/or maintain (e.g., police are often resistant to collaborating with gang workers); and (3) shifting political support and the vagaries of securing annual funding often create job uncertainty, program instability, and service interruptions, which can dilute intervention quality (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Tita et al., 2005; Tita & Papachristos, 2010). Second, Howell (2010) suggests that expectations for gang interventions may be too high to begin with, and that more modest goals may be in order. Given the diverse array of sociocontextual forces that contribute to gang membership, it is probably unreasonable to expect that extant interventions, even those that are comprehensive in scope, will result in dramatic changes for most youth embedded in a gang lifestyle. Changes in structural factors that predict gang membership and gang homicides (e.g., declines in wholesale/retail jobs, concentrated poverty; Curry & Spergel, 1988; Jackson, 1991) will require sustained political and economic commitment, not isolated intervention programs.

CONCLUSION

In summary, African Americans are overrepresented among gang youth, with race disparities resulting from several factors, including reporting biases (i.e., law enforcement overidentifying ethnic minorities as gang members) and greater cumulative risks experienced by young African American males. The empirical literature on gang desistance is underdeveloped, but research shows that youth gang involvement is often transient, and descriptive data suggests that, regardless of ethnicity, maturational factors (e.g., employment, stable relationships) facilitate disengagement from gangs. Not surprisingly, gang membership dramatically increases the risk of negative life outcomes, including drug involvement, violent victimization, and criminal behavior. Unfortunately, the consequences of gang involvement may be more severe for African American youth, suggesting the clear need for intervention in this group.

Yet very little is known about how best to intervene with gang-involved, African American youth. The science of gang intervention research is still in its infancy, with very few high-quality evaluations as yet (Howell, 2010; Klein & Maxson, 2006) and only one (unpublished) randomized trial. Moreover, African American youth are mostly underrepresented in the gang intervention literature compared to Latino youth. Although the most promising approaches

involve a combination of suppression and service provision, more high-quality research is needed focused specifically on this subset of the gang population.

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VOLUME 2

Kirkland C. Vaughans and
Warren Spielberg, Editors

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