

Girls and Gangs: Identifying Risk Factors for Female Gang Involvement

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INTRODUCTION

Nationwide there are an estimated 23,388 gangs with 664,906 members, approximately 3% of whom are female. Little is known about female gang involvement, particularly the factors which motivate adolescent girls to join gangs. Much of the research in this area is characterized by a gender bias with researchers typically ignoring this population or, when they do take them into account, utilizing male gang members as their source of information about females. This study was concerned with assessing adolescents' perceptions of risk factors for female gang involvement. Particular focus was placed upon family, peer, neighborhood, and intrapersonal influences.

METHOD

Participants:

- 31 female students were recruited from an alternative school in a high-crime, urban neighborhood with high levels of gang activity.
- Mean age = 14.79 (range = 12 to 17)
- Ethnicity: 26 African-American, 3 Latina, and 2 Jamaican
- The majority reported direct personal experience with adolescent gangs, either through previous gang membership themselves (16.1%) or through friendships with gang members (61.3%).

Procedure:

- 24 potential risk factors for gang involvement were grouped into 4 categories: Family, Friends, Neighborhood, and Self (i.e., intrapersonal issues).
- Participants chose the category which they felt had the greatest influence on female gang involvement. and described potential risk factors within that category (first factors which they could independently proffer, then those on the predetermined list).
- Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0="Doesn't Matter" to 5="Matters a Lot".
- This process was repeated for each of the remaining 3 categories.
- Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed in order to assess differences in the reasons that different participants gave for their ratings of the items.

RESULTS

Among the four broad categories, Peers were ranked as being most influential on female gang involvement, followed by Neighborhood, Family, and Self, respectively.

Category	Mean**	Std Dev
Friends	1.71	1.10
Neighborhood	2.68	1.11
Family	2.77	0.96
Self	2.90	0.94

Results of a repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant overall difference between categories [F(3, 90) = 6.57, p=.000], with Friends being rated as a significantly greater influence on female gang involvement than the other three categories [Neighborhood t(30) = 3.03, p=.005; Family t(30) = 3.25, p=.003; or Self t(30) = 4.15, p=.000].

Friends:

Results of a separate repeated-measures analysis of variance detected a significant overall difference within the Friends category [F (5, 150) = 4.96, p=.000]. As indicated in Table 2, post-hoc comparisons noted significant differences between several of the variables. Female gang membership was attributed to factors such as peer pressure, the desire for group affiliation, excitement and money-making opportunities within gangs. Opportunities for heterosexual contacts and "going along with the crowd" were viewed as weaker influences on gang involvement.

Table 2. Results of t-tests comparing items within the Friends category.

Variable	Mean**	Std Dev	Way to meet guys	Everyone is joining gangs	Kids in gangs make money	Excitement	Want to make friends
Other people pressure them to join gangs	2.42	1.57	P=.000	p=.003			
They want to make friends or join a group	2.19	1.66	P=.002	p=.030			
Excitement	1.90	1.54	P=.004				
Kids in gangs make money	1.68	1.62	P=.041				
Looks to them like everyone else is joining gangs	1.48	1.34					
It's a way to meet guys	0.97	1.25					

Peer Pressure:

"If the friend get in the gang she probably might turn against her. If she don't join, she might turn against her and break their friendship. Or the other gang members might call her, you know, her friends might call her a chicken, you know, because she is not in a gang. Especially if they are your true friends, they don't want to see their friends go to waste so they probably follow their friend's footsteps."

Making Friends:

"Maybe some people think they're lonely and they ain't got nobody and they would want a gang. They would join a gang. They think the gang members will be their friends and wouldn't turn their back on them or nothing. They think they'll make friends easy by them being in a gang."

Excitement:

"If you've never robbed anybody before or shoot or whatever and if you join a gang, automatically you know you're gonna have to get into that kind of lifestyle. And if that's what excites them, they're gonna automatically join that."

Making Money:

"If they are staying in a low class neighborhood and they see their friends in a gang with nice Tommy Hilfiger clothes and Polo and all this they are going to feel like 'Well, I got to get what they got to make myself look good.'"

Neighborhood:

Within the Neighborhood category, a repeated-measures analysis of variance conducted on the individual items also resulted in a significant overall difference [$F(5, 140) = 4.75, p=.000$]. Results of post hoc analysis comparing the individual items are detailed in Table 3. The need for protection and living in a high crime neighborhood were rated as significantly higher than lack of opportunity, living in a run-down neighborhood, or poverty. The presence of gangs in the neighborhood was also rated significantly higher than living in run-down or poor neighborhoods. Poverty was seen as the weakest influence.

Table 3. Results of t-tests comparing items within the Neighborhood category.

Variable	Mean**	Std Dev	Poor neighborhood	Run-down neighborhood	Lack of other opportunities	Gangs in neighborhood	Crime in neighborhood
It gives them safety/protection from other people.	2.74	1.48	p=.002	p=.002	p=.045		
There's a lot of crime in their neighborhood.	2.61	1.50	p=.001	p=.004	p=.023		
There are gangs in their neighborhood.	2.38	1.37	p=.013	p=.019			
There aren't any other opportunities for them.	1.94	1.41					
They live in a run-down neighborhood.	1.48	1.39					
They live in a poor neighborhood.	1.39	1.36					

Safety:

"If they live in a neighborhood with a lot of crime, they probably scared that something bad might happen to them if they don't get in a gang. So they need protection."

"If you not in a gang, some gangs will pressure you to be in gangs. Or, you know, if you don't be in gangs with them, they'll fight you and probably kill you."

High Crime:

"I think the neighborhood cause it's what you see around you. You have to learn from your surroundings. You can learn from what you see around you. Like I see a kid that's like 3 or 4 years old. If he grows up in the city and he sees people get shot everyday, it's going to be like an 80 or 90 percent chance that he's going to be in a gang cause he's seen it all his life."

Family:

A repeated-measures analysis of variance was also conducted on the individual items in the Family category, resulting in a significant overall effect [F(6, 180) = 5.62, p=.000]. As shown in Table 4, affective characteristics of the family were rated significantly higher than those items pertaining to parenting styles or family poverty.

Table 4. Results of t-tests comparing items within the Family category.

Variable	Mean**	Std Dev	Not enough money	No father around	Not strict enough	Too strict	Not good role models	Family fighting, arguing
Parents don't care about their kids	2.87	1.28	p=.000	p=.001	p=.000	p=.015	p=.031	
People in the family fighting, arguing	2.77	1.48	p=.000	p=.003	p=.003			
Parents aren't good role models	2.13	1.38						
Parents are too strict	2.10	1.66						
Parents aren't strict enough	1.58	1.50						
There's no father around	1.55	1.50						
Family doesn't have enough money	1.48	1.50						

Parental Affection:

"It's like you can't love a child too much and you can't love a child too little. You got to give just the right amount. And if you don't love a child, they're gonna go astray and find somebody else who will love them."

Family Conflict:

"I wouldn't want to stay in the house if my family was constantly arguing. I'd want to get a way."

Abuse:

"If people have an abusive family, whether verbally or physically, they're gonna be detached from their family and they want to have a family who doesn't abuse them so they want to join a gang."

Modeling:

"A person in your family could just be in a gang and they could come and they could just give them a little confidence to make them join the gang too."

Self:

The results of a repeated-measures analysis of variance did not indicate an overall significant difference between items within the Self category [F(4, 120) = 1.79, p=.136]. Thus no post-hoc

comparisons were made between items. The means and standard deviations of the items comprising this category are indicated in Table 5. Each of the items within the Self category was rated as having a moderate influence on female gang membership.

Table 5. Means and standard deviations of items within Self category.

Variable	Mean**	Std Dev
It's a way to get respect	2.65	1.56
Being in a gang makes them feel important	2.26	1.46
It makes them feel like they belong	2.03	1.49
It makes them feel good about themselves	2.03	1.33
It builds their self-confidence	2.00	1.59

Respect:

"They think that people will respect them more if they're in a gang. People won't try to fight them. People won't try to hurt them because they'll be scared that they in a gang."

"You have to be rough to get respect from some people."

DISCUSSION

Peer relationships appear to be the most significant determinant of female gang membership. A girl's decision to join a gang does not simply reflect "going along with the crowd," nor does it result from the desire for heterosexual contacts as previous research suggests. Joining a gang may be a conscious and deliberate decision that often involves weighing several alternatives: losing friends versus keeping them, belonging to a group versus being an outsider.

To some degree gangs may serve an adaptive function by providing the basic means for survival in threatening environments. Girls may become involved in gangs because of previous experiences of victimization or fears that they might be victimized in the future. Some girls may find that the only way to protect themselves from gangs in their neighborhood is to become affiliated with gangs.

Family relationships appear to play a relatively modest role as a motivator for female gang involvement. Affective characteristics of the family may have a larger influence on a girl's decision to join a gang than father absence, family poverty, or parental control. For some girls, becoming involved in gangs may draw the attention, albeit negative, of emotionally distant parents. For others, gangs may provide refuge from unsatisfactory home environments or the opportunity to act out violent behavior patterns learned in the family.

Gang membership may also aid in the formation of identity by providing status and a sense of belonging. Some girls may view gang membership as a way to get respect.

****Note:** Means of broad categories represent mean rankings on 4-point scale of overall influence, with 1 being highest. Means of individual items within each category represent mean ratings on 5-point scale of influence, with 0="Doesn't Matter" and 4="Matters a Lot."