

“Youth Gangs: Not Just an American Phenomenon”

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ABSTRACT

Gang research has a long history in the United States and gangs are often portrayed as an American problem. Much of the gang literature and gang lore would lead one to believe that the stereotypical gang is organized, hierarchical, territorial, and racially/ethnically homogeneous and that gang members are male, members of racial/ethnic minority groups concentrated in economically and socially marginalized neighborhoods. These stereotypes have contributed to a belief that gangs are not found in a number of communities in the USA or in other countries. The truth of the matter is that gangs come in many shapes and sizes and gang members represent the communities in which they reside. A relatively recent emergence of comparative and multi-method research conducted as part of the Eurogang Program of Research suggests that gangs not only exist throughout the world but that they are remarkably similar in terms of gang and gang member characteristics.

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Gang research in the United States of America can be traced back to the seminal work by Thrasher (1927). Over the ensuing years, most gang research has relied on case studies (including ethnographies, in depth studies of individuals and/or groups) that have provided rich, descriptive accounts of gang members and gangs. More recently, largely stimulated by the work of Walter Miller in the 1970s, gang researchers drew from law enforcement data to address the extent and nature of gangs and associated illegal activity. Journalists and the mass media have also been intrigued with gangs and have introduced the general population to gangs (including the gangs of the American Wild West, such as Jesse James’ gang in the Midwest and the Hole in the Wall Gang featuring Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid but also including more current images introduced in films such as *Colors* and in Gangsta Rap videos). Many of the ethnographic and contemporary journalistic accounts have focused on gangs in traditional “gang” cities including Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. These various sources of information have contributed to a

stereotypical image of gangs and gang members: members are generally viewed as males of racial/ethnic minority status residing in impoverished urban settings (see, for example, the work of Esbensen and Tusinski, 2007). One over-riding notion is that these gangs are an American phenomenon that does not exist in other nations.

The past 25+ years have witnessed a shift in gang research. Survey methodology, including cross-sectional and longitudinal studies utilizing in-person interviews of youth in general samples, self-administered questionnaires completed by students in school, and interviews with incarcerated samples, has been incorporated into the study of gangs. Findings from these research projects have challenges the stereotypical picture of gangs and gang members (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen and Winfree, 1998; Fagan, 1989; Thornberry et al., 1993).

While gang research has a long history and tradition in the USA, there is a lack of consensus about what constitutes a gang or a gang member. These definitional issues have received considerable attention (for a review of the definitional debate, consult Curry et al., 2014; Klein and Maxson, 2006). One common refrain used by law enforcement representatives defies definition and relies on description: “if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck, and looks like a duck; it’s a duck.” This approach of relying upon the physical characteristics of potential gang members may have some utility but caution must be urged. True, some gangs and gang members have denotable characteristics such as favoring one color (often blue or red), specific tattoos and hand signals to identify members, and wearing specific clothing. But, with the dissemination of culture and language through mass media and social media, such clothing styles, tattoos, and other “gang” symbols have been adopted by non-gang youth. So, while it may look like a duck, it may not be a duck. This reliance upon descriptive characteristics could well result in an over-identification of youth as gang involved. A better approach to defining gangs and gang members is required.

One potential definition is provided by the US Department of Justice. DOJ developed a working definition of a “gang” as a group or association of three or more persons who may have a common identifying sign, symbol, or name and who are involved in criminal activity which creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation” (GAO, 2009). This definition continues to rely on descriptive characteristics, which could be used to identify sports teams such as the Swiss National Football team. The inclusion of “involvement in criminal activity and creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation” begins to narrow the scope of interest but may still include groups that would not or should not be considered gangs. This is a rather important issue given the introduction of

enhanced sentencing guidelines for gang-involved crimes and/or crimes committed by gang members. Being identified as a gang member can result in many more years in prison. With such real-world consequences, it is essential that the label of gang member be correctly applied. I will return to this topic later in this chapter.

As mentioned above, there has been and continues to be debate about how to define gangs and gang membership. Researchers in the American context have adopted the self-nomination method. Similar to self-reported delinquency, the researcher relies upon the study participant to indicate whether or not they are a gang member. This self-nomination technique (also used by law enforcement) has proven to be particularly robust, especially in American gang research (see, for example, Esbensen et al. 2001). However, how well does such an approach work in different languages and different cultures?

Gangs Outside of the USA

During the 1990s gangs and gang culture proliferated. At the same time the USA experienced a drastic increase in youth violence, drug sales, and overall homicide rate. Some suggest that these two phenomena were inter-related and that gangs were involved with the distribution of crack cocaine and that this drug trade was particularly violent (see, for instance, the volume by Blumstein and Wallman, 2000). Two Los Angeles-based gangs, the Bloods and Crips, contributed to the notion that gangs were establishing satellite sets while creating a national drug and crime distribution network. Gangsta rap was widely disseminated and music videos popularized the “gangster” look (e.g., wearing specific colors, wearing a hat in a certain manner, hanging a bandana out of your pocket, sagging your pants, etc.) leading to the impression that gangs were developing everywhere. The question raised by these “wannabes” was whether they were “real” gangs and gang members or simply imitating this American phenomenon.

By the mid- to late 1990s, gang research in the United States had expanded beyond the traditional gang cities and found that gangs and gang-involved youth were found in a variety of settings, including large urban areas, the suburbs and small cities, and even in rural areas (e.g., Egley et al., 2004; Esbensen and Peterson Lynskey, 2001). Several researchers wondered if other countries, especially within Europe, were experiencing this same emergence or identification of gangs (e.g., Klein et al., 2001). In an attempt to address this question, a group of approximately 50 researchers and policy makers from the USA and throughout Europe convened a workshop in 1998. In the course of this three-day meeting, it became clear that in order to answer this question, there would be

a need for agreement on a definition as well as more systematic research. Some European researchers commented: we don't have gangs like you do in the US. This was an interesting observation because it highlighted the extent to which those individuals were responding to the stereotypical image of gangs presented in the media and not the empirical reality that not all gangs are large, hierarchical, organized, and territorial. This initial meeting in Germany led to the formation of the **Eurogang Program of Research** which has produced a number of research instruments (Weerman et al., 2009) as well as four volumes describing gang research in Europe and the United States as well as several comparative research projects (e.g., Decker and Weerman, 2005; Esbensen and Maxson, 2012; van Gemert et al. 2008; Klein et al., 2001).

Over the course of four years (five meetings and numerous email and telephone exchanges), this group of researchers agreed on a nominal definition of gangs: “a street gang is any **durable, street-oriented youth group** whose involvement in **illegal activities** is part of its **group identity**. This definition incorporates the following defining elements of a gang. The group must consist of 1) 3 or more people, 2) who are mostly between the ages of 12 and 25 years of age, 3) spend a lot of time in public places, 4) been in existence for more than 3 months, and, importantly, 5) accept and actually participate in illegal activity. One objective of this definition was to define the key elements of a gang rather than description of characteristics.

Early research conducted by these international scholars tended to be qualitative accounts similar to those produced by American ethnographers studying gangs. These case studies tended to mirror the findings from the American qualitative research that had been traditionally conducted in single sites (usually New York, Chicago, Los Angeles but also including St. Louis) and confirmed the impression that gangs were disproportionately male and immigrant groups. Some examples of these studies follow. In the Netherlands, van Gemert (2001) described a Moroccan gang thusly: “Of the 24 members ... all are Moroccan with the exception of a Dutch, a Surinamese, and a Dutch Philippine boy... the three non-Moroccan boys are ‘Moroccanized’.” Mares (2001) described the group he studied in Manchester, UK as “(a)bout 80 percent of the gang members are of ethnic descent, mostly Afro-Caribbean.” Lien’s (2001) description of Oslo gangs further highlights the ethnic status of the members: “Immigrant gangs, both homogeneous and multiethnic, represent a new phenomenon that has emerged during the eighties. The most famous of these is a gang composed of Pakistani youths called the Young Guns came to the attention of the media ... through a series of fights with other gangs, among them a Pakistani group called the ‘Killers’, a Filipino gang called the ‘Outsiders.’”

In addition to agreeing on a common definition, the Eurogang Program of Research also encouraged researchers to adopt the instruments that had been developed for use in multi-method, multi-site studies (Weerman et al., 2009). The importance of multiple methods research is underscored by the ethnographic studies that, like their American counterparts, focused attention on males and racial/ethnic minorities. To what extent were these studies representative of gangs in those countries? The quotes from qualitative research highlight the similarity to media generated picture. However, a growing body of research finds that gang members are representative of the communities from which they hail (Esbensen and Carson, 2012). As survey studies have moved beyond the traditional gang cities and out of “high-risk” neighborhoods and included wider representation of youth, the emerging picture is not consistent with the stereotypical picture painted by the media or even that depicted in the qualitative research. For example, studies have increasingly identified girls in gangs, ranging from around 25% to 50% with the norm being more in the 33% range. Studies in the USA, the UK, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands (and recently also in China and Trinidad Tobago) consistently report that girls account for one quarter to one-half of all youth gang members (Bendixen et al., 2005; Esbensen and Weerman, 2005; Gatti et al., 2011; Huizinga and Schumann, 2001; Pedersen and Lindstadt, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2012; Weerman, 2012).

These largely school-based surveys conducted in numerous nations during the past decade also cast doubt on the notion that gangs consist primarily of immigrant or minority youth. Klein concluded that “While both scholars and practitioners often specify gang differences according to ethnic backgrounds or neighborhood (community) characteristics, my own experience and a good deal of research suggest that group processes trump ethnicity and neighborhood” (2012:296). In their comparison of gang-involved youth in the Netherlands and the USA, Esbensen and Weerman (2005), for instance, found native born Dutch to be proportionately represented in youth gangs. In addition to the sex and ethnic background of gang members relative to non-gang members, the various studies utilizing the Eurogang definition have reported the presence of youth gangs in all nations studied. The prevalence rates vary but generally hover between five and 10 percent of youth being classified as gang involved. The International Self-Report Delinquency study was conducted in 30 nations across the globe. They report gang prevalence rates ranging from a low of 0.4 to a high of 16.8 percent (Gatti et al., 2011; Haymoz et al., 2013). Clearly the American phenomenon of youth gangs is not exclusively the domain of the American setting.

Gangs and Delinquent Behavior

One of the reasons that gangs are of interest to researchers and practitioners is that they commit a disproportionate amount of crime. You will recall from the Eurogang definition that a defining element of that definition was that it was okay to commit illegal acts and that doing so was part of the group identity. Some might argue that this aspect of the definition makes it tautological to say that gang members are more delinquent than non-gang members. Two points are relevant: 1) the difference in offending rates exist even when involvement in illegal behavior is not part of the definition (e.g., Esbensen et al., 2001) and 2) the order of magnitude in the differences in offending rates is such that it cannot be attributed solely to definitional issues. Several studies have found that gang boys and girls commit approximately four times as many offenses as their non-gang counterparts but the ratio increases with severity of offending (Esbensen and Weerman, 2005; Huizinga and Schumann, 2001; Pedersen and Lindstadt, 2012). In the American context, two large studies reported that the gang members in those samples, while accounting for a minority of the sample, accounted for more than 75 percent of violent offenses (Huizinga et al., 2003; Thornberry, 1998). It is important to note that gang girls are also engaged in the delinquent activity of the gang; they are not just affiliates who stand by while the boys fight.

One factor that has been related to levels of offending by gang members is the sex composition of the gangs. To date, only studies in the US and the Netherlands have examined this feature but results were similar. First, a minority of gangs are exclusively male or female. The relative distribution of girls and boys in gangs seem to influence group dynamics, including delinquency. Female offending is higher among girls who are in majority male gangs rather than sex-balanced gangs. Likewise, boys in sex balanced gangs commit fewer crimes than those in majority male gangs (e.g., Peterson et al., 2001; Peterson and Carson, 2012; Weerman, 2012).

Gang Member Stability – The gang effect

With the introduction of longitudinal studies including gang involved youth, researchers have been able to examine a number of issues associated with gang membership. For example, what are the risk factors contributing to joining a gang? What are the consequences of leaving the gang? Are youth delinquent prior to joining the gang or does the gang facilitate delinquent involvement? While cross-sectional studies of youth can provide a lot of information and provide a snapshot of their lives, longitudinal studies allow for examining changes and stability over time. Two early panel studies (that is, following the same individuals across time) highlighted the fact that gangs enhance youths' involvement in crime. While the gang members had slightly higher rates of delinquency prior to joining the gang, those rates skyrocketed during the time the youth was in the gang and then declined

upon leaving the gang (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993). Since publication of these findings, they have been replicated in other panel studies conducted in the US (Battin et al., 1998; Gordon et al., 2004; Melde and Esbensen, 2011, 2013, 2014; Peterson et al., 2004; Thornberry et al., 2003), Canada (Gatti et al., 2005), and Norway (Bendixen et al., 2005).

In addition to identification of the enhancement effect, these studies highlighted the fact that gang membership is a relatively transient experience for most gang youth. Contrary to the media generated myth that “once in a gang, in a gang for life” or “blood in, blood out,” most gang youth were members of the gang for less than one year (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al. 1993, 2003).

Risk Factors

One important question is: why do youth join gangs? In the preceding sections of this chapter, it has been noted that gangs are found in a variety of settings and in all nations studied. These gang youth are representative of the larger adolescent population and the majority of youth who join a gang, remain in the gang for a relatively short period of time. Are the youth who join gangs in some way different from those youth who do not? To answer this question, researchers have examined risk factors that may be predictive of gang joining. To date, most of this research has been conducted in the USA but there is a growing body of research in Europe that suggests that the risk factors are similar across different national contexts (e.g., Bendixen et al., 2004; Esbensen and Weerman, 2005; Pedersen and Lindstadt, 2012)

Risk factors are generally categorized into five different domains: neighborhood, family, school, peers, and individual. To date, risk factors in all five domains have been linked to gang joining and youth are at greater risk the more risk factors they possess across different domains (see, for example, Esbensen et al., 2010). Risk factor research is hindered by the fact that different researchers employ different measures of similar concepts but an important finding is that regardless of how risk factors are operationalized, they tend to produce the same or similar results. In their comparative research, Esbensen and Weerman (2005) examined factors associated with gang membership in a sample of students from the USA and another from the Netherlands. To measure “parental monitoring” the Dutch students responded to the following three questions: 1) At home, I have to do what my parents say; 2) I know what is and what is not allowed for me at home; and 3) My parents know where I go to outside the home. In contrast, the American students responded to the following four questions: 1) When I go someplace, I leave a note for my parents or call them to

tell them where I am; 2) My parents know where I am when I am not at home or at school; 3) I know how to get in touch with my parents if they are not at home; and 4) My parents know who I am with if I am not at home. In spite of these different measures, the concept of parental monitoring is identified as a risk factor in both samples. Other risk factors that have very similar patterns in the two studies include: peer delinquency and peer pressure, parental attachment, school commitment, impulsivity, risk seeking, and moral attitudes. To date, similar risk factors have been identified in studies conducted in the USA, the Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, and China.

Summary

In this brief chapter I have addressed several themes related to the phenomenon of youth gangs. First, definition matters: just because it walks like a duck, looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, doesn't mean it's a duck. It is important to have defining elements that move beyond sheer description of a gang. In the American context, self-definition works well. For comparative research, however, a common definition that identifies key characteristics that distinguish gangs from other groups is necessary. The Eurogang Program of Research provides one definition that has received considerable support (<http://www.umsl.edu/ccj/Eurogang/euroganghome.html>). Just as definition matters, so too does research methodology. Single methods can provide important information but researchers will benefit from incorporating multiple methods. Such an approach will provide, for instance, a broad overview of the gang situation using school-based surveys while obtaining more nuanced and contextual information by incorporating ethnographic and/or expert surveys.

While the history of gang research has tended to report on single-method, single-site research, it is important for understanding the youth gang problem to include not only mixed/multiple methods but to include multiple sites within nations and across nations. To date, studies have suggested considerable robustness and consistency in the nature and extent of the gang problem. Prevalence rates, when using a common definition, indicate gangs exist to varying degrees in all nations studied. Interestingly, especially given stereotypes, girls account for a sizable percentage (generally around 30 – 35%) of gang members. And, based on relatively recent research, other stereotypical depictions of youth gangs are called into question:

- 1) Gangs are not solely a minority or immigrant problem;
- 2) Gangs are found outside of economically distressed urban areas;
- 3) A common set of risk factors appear to be associated with gang membership;
- 4) Involvement in delinquent behavior and especially violence is closely associated with gang joining; and

5) Gang membership is a transitory stage in adolescence – that is, the average youth belongs to the gang for less than one year.

Much has been learned with respect to youth gangs during the past two decades. Continued collaboration and expansion of research to more countries will help to establish if the youth gang phenomenon transcends all national boundaries or if cultural and societal differences persist. To date, the emerging comparative research holds promise and, as we move forward, perhaps this comparative approach will be successful in identifying strategies to reduce the prevalence and negative consequences of youth gangs.

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