

Gang Behavior and Movies: Do Hollywood Gang Films Influence Violent Gang Behavior?

by

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Abstract

While there have been numerous studies on gangs, most research has avoided the complexity of asking and answering the question involving possible influences that the media might have on gang behavior, more specifically Hollywood's gang-related films. The main purpose of this paper is to either offer a plausible explanation for the influences that gang films have on gang-related behaviors such as gang wars, lifestyles, violence, and criminal activities; or suggest that these aspects of gang life are simply a reflection of reality portrayed in Hollywood's gang-related films. Data collections for this qualitative descriptive analysis consisted of interviews with law enforcement officials, current and former gang members, and newspaper reports of gang violence relating to gang films. The interviews provided valuable insight on what is being learned in gang-related films and what is currently happening on the street. The theoretical explanations used to explain this association between gang behavior and the viewing of gang films include social learning, differential association, and instigation theory.

Within the last three decades, the emergences of gangs and violent gang behavior have substantially increased. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, gang membership has increased from approximately 100,000 in 1980 to more than 845,000 in 1996 (Howell, 1998). While there has been sufficient research in defining gangs and their reasons for delinquent or criminal acts, most researchers avoid the complexity of the possible influence that the media, specifically Hollywood movies, has had on gang behavior. The task of this paper is to offer a plausible explanation of the recent trend of violent gang behavior and the influence or impact the media (i.e. films) has on gang activities.

Youth gangs have been a part of American society since the early nineteenth century. They have consisted of various ethnic and racial groups which have been perceived as delinquent and criminal. Gangs have been found to exist in large and small cities throughout the United States. In the 1930s to the 1950s, gangs received much attention from both the media and academia. In the 1960s to the 1970s, the interest in studying gang behavior

seemed to have declined, but the 1980s proved to be quite different. The 1980s and 1990s saw a surge of literature on gang behavior and related gang violence. Academia, the media, and law enforcement officials began to express an interest and concern for the growth of this emerging problem. Although often portrayed as an urban-ghetto problem spinning out of control with no solutions, life in a gang has affected all races, ethnicities, and cities of all sizes.

Social researchers have concluded that reasons for youths becoming involved in gang life have included economic strain in the community (Fagan, 1996), living in dangerous neighborhoods (Taylor, 1990), limited educational and employment opportunities (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988; Taylor, 1990), access to guns and drugs (Howell & Decker, 1999; Spergel, 1995; Klein, 1995; Fagan, 1996), and dysfunctional families (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). However, an area that has been primarily ignored by social researchers is the influence that the popular media has had on gang life. Most gang experts make reference to the media's depiction of the images of gang life, but rarely is this association with the media further discussed.

It is evident that the recognition of youth gang violence has been best portrayed in the media. The police, politicians, and the news have all played an influential part in creating an image for the public on what, how, and why gangs behave the way they do. But most noticeably it has been the production of Hollywood gang-related films which has shown the public serious violent depictions of various gang behaviors and violence.

Gang-related movies have dated back as early as the 1930s; however, it is during the 1980s and 1990s that such movies as *Scarface* (1983), *Colors* (1988), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), and *New Jack City* (1991) received a considerable amount of attention because of the apparent violent aftermath these movies had on "real life" gang activity. In understanding movies and the possible relationship to gang violence, some critical questions arise: What impact do gang-related movies have on youth gang violence? Is it possible to conclude that an increase in police reported gang violence and gang activities is the result of Hollywood's depiction of violent gang behavior? A broader question in understanding this relationship is whether gang members learn the acts of violence in the gang-related movies or the movie itself is a reflection of the current gang behavior. Much of the media's image of gang behavior is considered sensationalized, but how much learning takes place when members of youth gangs act out their violent aggressions after viewing a gang-related film?

Review of the Literature

Literature addressing the relationship between violent gang behavior and movies is almost nonexistent. While most authors analyzing gang behavior make reference to popular culture (i.e. the mass media) as ways of depicting gang life, only Knox (1999) makes a serious attempt to discuss the proliferation of gang activity through the mass media. Nevertheless, the media's glorification of gangs and the learning potential in understanding gang behavior has not been extensively researched. Part of this void in the academic literature is because of the complex nature of human behavior and understanding the impact of mass media. While there are extensive studies on gangs and on the effects of television and movies, there are no studies to my knowledge on the link between gang-related movies and the violent behaviors gangs learn from those films.

The literature review focuses on 1) early and more recent research on gang behavior, 2) the sociological implications of social learning theory, and 3) the theoretical assumptions made about the effects of mass media and popular culture. By using these three ideas as a foundation, one can examine the impact of Hollywood's interpretation of gang behavior on the realism of gang life.

Early Gang Research

One of the earliest most cited studies on gangs is Frederick Thrasher's *The Gang: A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago* (1927). Thrasher identified gangs in Chicago's economically disadvantaged areas and concluded that the rise in gang activity was due to deteriorating and shifting neighborhoods. Interestingly, Thrasher had a chapter entitled, "The Movies and the Dime Novel" (p. 102-116). In this chapter, Thrasher criticized Hollywood movies, radio, newspapers, and other forms of mass media. Thrasher noted that young gang members are very impressionable and prefer violent imagery. His position was that the mass media "awakens the spirit of imagination" (p.107).

Thrasher also provided specific accounts of juvenile delinquents committing various types of crimes because of the nature of what was learned in the movies. One explanation given by a youth gang member was that "it looked so easy in the movies, and we thought we could get away with it, too" (p. 107). Thrasher also noted that the specific techniques of violent and criminal acts are communicated through the mass media. It is these techniques or "skills" which are learned by criminal offenders and gang members.

Another well recognized study on gang life is Whyte's (1943) look at Italian gangs in the Boston area. Whyte found that gang members provided each other with protection, status, and material goods within their neighborhood community. As Knox (1991) noted in his analysis of gang research, the image of the gang life that is portrayed in *West Side Story* (1961) emerges from Whyte's work.

Theoretical Assumptions about Gang Behavior

There has been an extensive amount of research and literature written about gang behaviors since the early 1920s. While Thrasher and Whyte provide early classical theoretical assumptions about gang behavior before the 1960s, other prominent sociologists addressed the concern for gangs in traditional society (e.g. Shaw & McKay, 1942; Cohen, 1955; Bloch & Niederhoffer, 1958). Beginning in the 1960s, sociologists continued to produce theoretical literature about gang behavior, but also addressed the definitions and structural characterizations of gangs (e.g. Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Yablonsky, 1966; Miller, 1975). As society becomes more complex and crime rates rise, the dynamics of street gangs also change. This has prompted a new look at gangs, which are becoming more complex and diverse than those of the earlier times (e.g. Huff, 1993; 1996; Taylor, 1990; Knox, 1991; Hagedorn, 1998; Hagedorn & Macon, 1988; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1995).

One of the most consistently cited works on gang behavior is Cohen's (1955) theoretical discussion of delinquent subcultures. Cohen concluded that youth gangs emerge as a reaction to the status frustration among the working class who cannot achieve the goals set by the middle-class. In general, subculture theories incorporate the principles of strain, social disorganization, and differential-association. In reference to gang activities and behaviors, subculture theories help explain why the culture of gang life emerges, why the gang takes a particular shape, what kind of role the gang plays in the community, why the gang continues to exist from one generation to the next, and those specific techniques that each member knows.

However, one of the most important theoretical assumptions made about criminal behavior is implied in Edwin Sutherland's (1947) differential-association theory. Sutherland developed a broad, general theory of crime and delinquency that focused on the learning process. According to this theory, criminal behavior is learned through association with intimate groups, such as family or peers. It is assumed that the learning takes place in forms of techniques and the specific directions of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes. Sutherland stated that "a person becomes

delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violations of law” (p. 6-7) which is the key element in the principles of differential association. In addition, “differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity” (p. 6-7).

Akers’ (1997) extension and modification of social learning theory offers an especially useful framework for understanding media influences on gang behavior. Akers focuses on four major concepts that explain the learned behavior from a criminological perspective: differential-association, definitions, differential reinforcement and imitation. It is the imitation that provides the key component in gang members acting out the behaviors in gang-related films. According to Akers (1997), an “imitation refers to the engagement in behavior after the observation of similar behavior in others” (p. 67).

In applying the elements of social learning theory, Winfree, Backstrom, and Mays (1994) examined youth gang members’ attitudes toward gang activities, social reinforcers, gang-related delinquency and gang involvement. Winfree et al. concluded that social learning theory provided a link to understanding gang membership. The authors defined differential-association as “the proportion of one’s peers involved in gang activity.” Using the elements in Sutherland’s and Akers’ theories, the authors concluded that friends who engage in gang behavior increase the social forces impelling the youth to become a gang member. In addition, “gang members appear to possess very pro-gang attitudes” toward one another (Winfree, Backstrom, & Mays, 1994, p. 162).

Cathartic and Stimulating Effects

Research on the link between media depictions of violence and social aggression initially revolved around two competing hypotheses. One hypothesis is recognized as the cathartic effect, meaning that the presented violence acts as a therapeutic release for anger and self-hatred (Baldwin & Lewis, 1972). Though some of these gang-related movies may promote violent tendencies of gang life, the actual message about gangs to the viewers is how destructive gang life actually is. Interestingly, research has not substantiated the notion of a cathartic effect (cited in Snyder, 1991).

The second hypothesis is the stimulating effect. It is the notion that viewing films with a constant depiction of violence (i.e. violent gang behaviors) provides stimuli for violent actions and anti-social behavioral attitudes (Surette, 1990; 1991). One example that could potentially explain the stimulating effect was the shooting riot that occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota after the showing of *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). Police interviewed

members of two rival gangs who were noted in saying that this film “fired them up” (Bryant, 1991). While direct cause cannot be substantially proven, society has the tendency to blame films for incidents like this.

In addition to imitation and modeling, the stimulating effect includes the sociological assumptions of social learning. It is through the process of viewing a movie that gangs learn the techniques, motives, and drives of violent and aggression behavior. This hypothesis is clearly supported by the principles in Sutherland’s differential association theory and Akers’ expansion of the social learning theory that includes the concept of imitation.

Gangs and Movie Effects

As mentioned earlier, the study of gang behavior and the study of linking behaviors to the effects movies has on individuals has not been seriously analyzed. However, the debate on movies influencing delinquent behavior continues. Even in the 1930s, the debate on whether the production of “crime” or “gangster” films disposes the youth to crime existed (Blumer & Hauser, 1933, p. 1). Blumer and Hauser were some of the earliest researchers to look at juveniles and movies. They sampled hundreds of males and females from junior high to high school children, and to juveniles and adults incarcerated at various correctional institutional settings to see if Hollywood pictures influenced their delinquent and criminal behaviors. Blumer and Hauser (1933) concluded that motion pictures do exert influences on the youth. The influences are both positive and negative. In a positive manner, movies reinforce negative messages of delinquent behavior; while negatively, movies dispose and lead individuals to commit delinquent or criminal acts.

Snyder (1991) looked at movies, juvenile delinquency and conduct disorders by applying the theoretical assumptions of social learning theory in order to understand the relationship between delinquent behaviors and movies. Snyder noted that movies have both pro-social and anti-social effects on juveniles. Snyder also discussed two theoretical assumptions linking delinquency and movies: social learning theory and instigation theory.

Social learning, as mentioned above, is the idea that criminal behavior is learned through the interaction with others in a process of communication and the learning of delinquent or criminal behaviors within intimate personal groups (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978). The instigation model, however, proposes that “the violent content in social learning theory experiments somehow instigated an immediate aggressive response” (Snyder 1991, p. 258).

In applying the instigation model to films, one can propose that the communication messages (i.e. the interpretation of gang behavior in gang films) can produce varying degrees of emotional responses, and in turn, influence the individual's behavior. Another significant factor in the instigation model is the justification of the act. If a movie sequence agitates a viewer, then aggressive behavior would be justified. For example, prior to the opening of the film *Colors* (1988), the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) arrested over 1000 suspected gang members in a 48-hour period (Scott, 1988). Essentially, the film's portrayal of gang life provoked violence that might be considered justified because of the frustration gang members feel when confronting the LAPD.

In an analysis of delinquency and movies, Snyder (1995a) discussed films depicting various characteristics such as sex, social class, and race. He concluded that there is "much evidence for the concept of bi-directional causality" (p. 54). In other words, viewing violent delinquent films leads to violent behavior and this behavior leads to more viewing of violent images. Snyder also noted that the socialization process in adolescence includes broad social institutions such as the media (i.e. Hollywood films). The second part of Snyder's analysis (1995b) concentrated on the sociological and psychological implications of violent delinquency films. It is noted that movies and other forms of media can serve as control systems for psychological and social conflicts. Unfortunately, because some adolescents are limited in their ability to recognize complex plots, they may get the wrong message about what the film is trying to say. This was clearly the case in both *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) where the producers and directors were trying to convey an important message that these films were anti-gang, anti-drug, and anti-violence movies. Sadly, many youth gang members failed to understand these messages in those movies.

In another report on delinquency and films, McGee and Robertson (1982) analyzed films with reference to juvenile delinquency from the 1920s through the 1970s. The focus of their research was to explore the different degrees of delinquency in these films, society's response, and how these films portrayed juveniles in a social context. The authors recognized that defining delinquency would be a difficult task since the definition of delinquency would evidently change over time.

The evolution of how Hollywood presented the films' story lines changed from the early 1920s recognized as the youth rebellion of the "jazz generation" to the 50s, and turbulent 60s, as the throw-back years of motorcycle gangs and other rebellious activities. The delinquency films in the 1970s are typically recognized as laughable films (e.g. *American Graffiti*,

1973), but towards the end of this decade Hollywood began to depict more serious violent delinquent films (e.g. *The Warriors*, 1971). In the course of McGee and Robertson's (1982) extensive research, the films which had gained the most attention and created social controversy during the 1950s were *The Wild One* (1954), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

As indicated earlier, the most prevalent research on gangs and movies is Knox's (1999) analysis of the mass media and its relationship to gang issues. Knox makes a brief attempt to discuss popular culture by surveying the basic components of the mass media such as books, the radio, the internet, television and news programs, and movies. His primary concern was to analyze gang films that concentrated on "promoting the vigilante option as an effective response against gangs," "the false view that gangs are omnipotent," "a reduction or decrease in the respect for law," and myths and misinformation about gang life (p. 26). While Knox's (1999) research is interesting and provides thought for further research, the article is a film synopsis and review of various gang-related films. Despite no theoretical assumptions made about gang behaviors, Knox's film analysis does show that this form of mass media can affect the public's perception about gangs and continues to cultivate the gang problem.

While Akers' social learning theory and Sutherland's differential-association perspective provides a theoretical foundation for understanding gangs and learned behaviors; interviews with gang members provided the greatest support in validating those theoretical assumptions. In Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) study of gang life, the authors interviewed gang members from the streets of St. Louis. In trying to understand why gangs began to proliferate in the St. Louis area, one may consider some of the responses from various gang members listed below. It is the gang members' responses to certain gang-related movies that show the importance and impact of how Hollywood's films influence gang behavior.

"People say *Colors* brought the Crips [to St. Louis]" [Male #051] (p. 86).

"The reason how it got started is they had the movie *Colors*, that was a gang-related movie and the action impact that had on teenagers, they liked stuff like that. They looked at it like the real reality of things in the movie *Colors*" [Male #017] (p.88).

"All I know is when *Colors* came out that's when they started sparking up all of these gangs. Crips and Bloods and all that" [Male

#045] (p. 88).

The responses of the St. Louis gang members on the film *Colors* (1988) clearly show how Hollywood was able to grab the attention of those outside the Los Angeles area. While *Colors* (1988) introduced the Bloods and CRIPs to mainstream society, the police and other gang experts noted that this film was not a very accurate portrayal of gang life (Landre, Miller, Porter, 1997). Another considerable factor for understanding the influences on the spread of gangs is Maxson's (1998) distinction between "gang proliferation" and "gang migration." Gang proliferation is defined as "the increase in communities reporting the existence of gangs and gang problems" (p. 2). Gang migration is defined as "the movement of gang members from one city to another" (p. 2). Nevertheless, this film had a substantial impact on the behavior of the St. Louis gangs through the principles of social learning. Also, in evaluating the conduct rules of being a gang member and the application of those rules, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) reported that one gang member claimed their rules "came from the movie *Colors*" [Male #034] (p. 102-103). Another film, the HBO documentary *Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock* (1994) which portrayed black and white gangs, showed evidence of the national migration of gang activity and how the influence of popular music and film promoted youth gang culture (Landre, Miller, & Porter, 1997).

In Sanchez-Jankowski's (1991) participant observation study of gang behaviors, he documented the attractiveness of media coverage for the gangs. Media portrayals of gangs enhance the reputations of gangs and make them more attractive to prospective members. Sanchez-Jankowski argues that gangs and the media mutually exploit one another.

In a more recent study, Klein's (1995) conversation with a gang task force police officer in Texas blamed *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) for perpetuating the gang culture in his community. While the movie had an anti-gang message, the officer indicated that the gang members focused on one particular scene. In this scene, a gang member shoots several rivals by callously and coolly approaching each one while shooting them in the head. "That's what the gang guys get off on," said the officer. That was a righteous gang execution, and they really grab their jocks on that one; forget the rest of the movie" (p. 206).

Some gang theme films have resulted in serious acts of violence after the movie has been released. For example, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) caused the formation of various delinquent gangs, whose activities included

a number of rapes and murders in England (Schmid & de Graf, 1982; Surette, 1990; 1991). In fact, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) greatly impacted gangs by modeling certain techniques which were later emulated. In a dramatic rape scene the gang cut the woman's clothes with scissors and made her husband watch as they sang "Singing in the Rain." This scene was imitated by a number of violent youth gangs. A study conducted by The Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry (1976) reported that a number of incidences in the United Kingdom of rape assaults involved the identical act from the film. The Commission also reported that Australia and New York City recorded similar violent acts as the result of imitating this film.

The film, *The Warriors* (1979), was blamed for three murders by the victim's families and the media. Two of the murders occurred in California, one in a small farm town and the other in a Palm Springs drive-in theatre, while the third occurred in Boston. The Boston case reached the Massachusetts Supreme Court where the plaintiff blamed the movie for the fatal stabbing of a youth in which the assailant learned and imitated his actions from that gang film (see *Yakubowicz v. Paramount Pictures*, 1989). The courts concluded that neither the producer nor the theater were liable for the assailants' actions by showing the film knowing that there were violent scenes depicted in the film.

Based on the literature review, it is evident from the theoretical assumptions made by social learning theory, differential-association, and instigation theory that a plausible relationship exists between gang behaviors and movies (see Model 1). Gang interviews making reference to gang-related films also support the possibility of this relationship. The hypothesis of this research project is that gang behavior, either physical or verbal, is learned from Hollywood's depiction of gang-related films.

Methodology

Data Collection

The methodology of this research project is a qualitative descriptive analysis of newspaper reports, interviews with law enforcement officials, and current and former gang members. The data collection for this research project was derived in a three prong process. First, titles of gang-related films produced by Hollywood were analyzed. The collection of films was gathered from an internet resource called www.allmovie.com that provided a plot breakdown of each film, local video stores, and my own extensive personal collection. In addition, recommendations made by Knox (1991), Snyder (1991) and McGee and Robertson (1982) in their analyses of gang films was considered. Because so many gang-related movies have complex plots that include gang issues, it was important to screen the films to determine whether they would meet the author's definition of a gang.

Defining a gang is itself a complex problem. Not all social scientists agree on what a gang is, and much is determined by the type of study. Horowitz (1990) contends that the gang definition should remain pluralistic. However, it is Miller's (1980) definition that has been most widely cited because of its usefulness with the criminal justice practitioners and researchers. According to Miller (1980), "a youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activities and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise" (p. 121). Other social researchers have provided definitions appropriate to their research on gangs (see Howell & Decker, 1999; Klein, 1995; Sanders, 1994; Spergel, 1995; Maxson & Klien, 1996; Yablonsky, 1997; Hagedorn & Macon, 1988; Hagedorn, 1998; Block and Block, 1993; Knox, 1991).

In order to determine whether a film would be considered in the analysis; every effort was spent on viewing these films to determine whether the movies qualified under the author's definition of a gang-related film. In analyzing gang-related films, a street gang is defined as a group of three or more loosely organized youths or adults competing for respect, territory, drugs, weapons, and commits a criminal activity collectively as a group. Also, an individual street gang member who violates the law in the name of the gang is included in this definition. Gang colors, graffiti, and language (verbal or non-verbal) must be present in the film. The story line must primarily focus on gang life and behaviors.

Films that did not fit the appropriate definition of a street gang were not analyzed in this study. These films included the early gangster movies of 1930s and 1940s such as *Public Enemy* (1931). Films that portrayed organized criminal activities (i.e. the “Mafia”) such as the *Godfather* series (1972, 1974, 1990) were also excluded. While the “Mafia” is considered by some as a gang, the difference is that these gang films originate depicting a highly structured criminal organization; however, my definition only encompasses gangs that are loosely structured.

The second form of data collection included interviewing current and former gang members and law enforcement officials in direct contact with street gangs. The law enforcement officials included members from federal, state, local, and county divisions from around the country. Interviews were conducted over the phone, face-to-face, and via email. All the names of the gang members have been kept confidential. The law enforcement officials and those specifically working with a gang task force, unless agreed to be mentioned, are also kept confidential and recognized only by the region which their city resides.

Finally, the content analysis of newspaper reports on gang-related incidences referring to Hollywood gang films was analyzed. Various newspaper agencies reported violent disturbances as the direct result of showcasing gang-related films. Over thirty news articles were collected and reviewed.

Interview Samples

A total of six current and former gang members were interviewed either face-to-face or through a series of open-ended questions by email (see Appendix A). Making contact and developing a trust was the single most difficult task. I made contact with gang members through the various colleges and universities where I have taught sociology and criminology courses. Some of my students were former gang members while other students on campus informed of the research provided assistance by introducing me to current gang members. I also searched internet web pages for gang members who included email addresses. Of the numerous emails I sent out, only one responded to my series of questions. While most gang members were open to talk about their experiences in gang life, the topic of movies didn’t facilitate any specific responses to learned behaviors. All of the gang members commented on the glorification and truthfulness of gang-related movies but did not provide me with substantial learning techniques or examples of particular scenes from a film. Also, every effort was made to hide the identity of the gang member, law enforcement officials, and their

locations. In cases where a name and location is given, permission was granted by the interviewee.

Interviews of law enforcement officials were conducted via email and telephone interviews (see Appendix B). Dozens of law enforcement officials were contacted in order to get their perspective of whether gang-related films can be influential on youths and gangs but only six responded. It was evident in their responses that when Hollywood produces gang-related films, a concern grows in the law enforcement community. My interviews with the law enforcement officials proved to be valuable and informative.

Analysis of Law Enforcement Interviews

According to a gang task force officer in a mid-sized Midwest city, “the movie *Colors* started the [name of gang withheld] which is growing stronger each year. It started out as a joke but now has meaning. We have also seen that *The Warriors* gave names to at least three gangs in this area.” The same officer also referred to a recent movie produced entitled *Belly* (1998) which resulted in increased security measures at various cinemas. One interesting comment that this officer made was his observation on home invasions. “I have also seen home invasions on drug dealers that were not as frequent prior to the movie and the gang members did just that in this movie.” Unfortunately, the officer did not elaborate on which film facilitated these acts.

While many of the films of the 1980s and 1990s portray African-American gangs, Latino gangs have also been the focus of a number of Hollywood films. In another mid-sized Midwestern city, a gang investigator commented on the high population of Latinos, and gangs in this community referred frequently to the films *Blood In Blood Out: Bound by Honor* (1993) and *Mi Vida Loca* (1994). The officer also noted the kinds of weapons gang members use, stating “I would say they try to get their hands on some of the guns they see in the movies. They all talk about GLOCKS, UZI, TEC-9, and BERETTA. Not one of them has any idea what the hell the difference between the GLOCK and the BERETTA is. I think they get that from the movies, they certainly don’t get that from us.”

Interestingly, the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department voiced the greatest concern for Hollywood’s version of gang life and violent activities. Deputy Wes McBride with the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department commented, “I would say the most influential movie that began the migrations of gang philosophy if not actual movement of people was *Colors*, which was not a very true portrayal of gangs.” In 1988, McBride, president of the California Gang Investigators Association claimed, “*Colors* would

leave dead bodies from one end of this town to the other” (Goldstein, 1988). Eleven years later when asked about this comment he states, “it [dead bodies] didn’t happen here, but in other places, there were several shootings and a few deaths.”

According to McBride, *Boulevard Nights* (1979) provided a more accurate description of gang life. Filmed in East Los Angeles, the movie cast real gang members, as did *American Me* (1992). “*American Me* and *Blood In Blood Out* were fairly realistic and did have some effect on the streets here in L.A.” This L.A. County Sheriff also traveled to South Africa to study their gang problem and commented, “Our [US films] movies, especially *Blood In Blood Out* are particularly popular with their gangs. They made constant reference to this film and emulated many of the acts portrayed in the film.”

Also responding to the interview questions were Gang Task Force officers from a Southern city. “Yes, we do get concerned when movies highlighting gangs and gang activities come to our community. When *187* came out, our Gang Task Force was activated and concentrated its efforts at local movie theaters typically visited by gang members.” One specific technique that this particular police agency believes is the result of the many gang-related films is the methods in which gang members shoot a gun. “Some of them commit crimes by imitating movies, for example, doing a drive-by shooting and aiming their guns sideways.”

At the federal level, an agent commented that while they have not had any investigations that have been a direct result of a gang movie, the film *Point Break* (1991) provided the learning techniques for a number of bank robberies across the country. *Point Break* (1991) was a film about a group of bank robbers using masks depicting the Presidents of the United States to conceal their identity. While this film is not considered a gang-related film, it clearly supports the theoretical elements in social learning and differential-association.

One of the most recognizable gang experts is Steve Nawojczyk, the famous coroner from Little Rock, Arkansas who narrated the HBO Documentary *Gang War: Bangin’ in Little Rock* (1994). In responding to my email questionnaire, Nawojczyk made this comment:

“...some police departments do add extra security when gang oriented movies come out. This was especially true in Little Rock in the early 90s. Gang violence is changing somewhat however. Gang leaders of several nations have issued orders to cease the “drive-bys” and begin doing “walk-ups.” B the OG’s (original gangsters) I’ve talked to say that it is to reduce the constant public attention brought to them by the

“drive-bys” and that “drive-bys” frequently injure or kill innocent victims.”

The rationale for doing “walk-ups” in order to kill a rival gang member is a relatively new phenomenon. Sanders (1994) studied the dynamics of “drive-bys” and the various settings in which this particular act takes place. However, no mention of killing a rival gang member by doing a “walk-up” is explored. It is possible, that despite gang leaders changing their mode of killing rival gang members from “drive-bys” to “walk-ups” that this act was learned in films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *New Jack City* (1991). In both these films, gang members perform execution style murders in public places.

The law enforcement responses definitely support the notion that gangs learn some of their behaviors or activities from gang-related films. The concern that these officials expressed when gang films are shown in their community indicates that gangs respond in a negative manner. While some of the disturbances might not be a direct result of the film, gang-related films have provided gang members with new ideas for delinquent or criminal activities.

Analysis of Gang Member Interviews

Interviewing current and former gang members proved to be challenging. The sample consisted of only two current and four former gang members, two females and four males. Their ages ranged from 18-29 in which four gang members were black, one white, and one Hispanic. Through contacts with law enforcement officials and my association with gangs from teaching, I was able to discuss this topic with gang members from various states. In my discussion with various gang members, their response to the gang-related movies echoed conformity on the types of films displaying gang behavior. Here are their responses:

“...the movie *Colors* didn’t start all the gangs in our city but it definitely sparked an interest. The song ‘Colors’ was very cool...I did teach my homeboys how to drive a stick shift car and then those guys went and did a drive-by shooting...Thank god I wasn’t in the car.” [G#1]

“I had heard a few years ago that when the movie *New Jersey Drive* came out it was not going to be shown in Toledo because it taught gangs how to steal cars and do drive-by shootings. At least that’s what I heard.” [G#3]

“Yes, movies have an impact on gang behavior.” [G#5]

“...sure movies show what gang life is all about. *New Jack, Boyz* and *Colors* were accurate portrayals of life on the streets. Many of the things that are depicted in movies is what goes on in the streets.” [G#2]

“*Blood In Blood Out* is definitely what life is like in a Latino gang. I’m not sure if we did anything from the movie but I know we all talked about the movie.” [G#6]

“I hung out with a lot of gang bangers. I even dated a guy who did it. I know that some films really charged them up. Films like *Boyz, New Jack, Menace II Society*, you know those films. Hell, bullets wiz by my house a lot. Our home has been robbed plenty of times. It’s crazy neighborhood I live in.” [G#4]

While the gang members’ responses did not show a direct cause in learning specific techniques from a particular gang-related film, a pattern did emerge. All the respondents recognized gang-related films and how some of them resembled life in a gang. They also mentioned films that received the most media attention such as *Colors* (1988), *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). The two oldest gang members interviewed stated that the media does have an impact on gang behavior but would not clarify about specific techniques of illegal activities that were possibly learned from gang-related films. They did however identify some films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Blood In Blood Out* (1993) as fairly accurate depictions of gang life. Most of the younger respondents were unsure about the impact of gang-related films but were very familiar with the ones which portrayed gang life. Despite the low sample size, my interview responses and the study conducted by Decker and Van Winkle (1996) mirror similar conclusions about the impact of gang-related movies.

Analysis of Newspaper Reports

The third prong in the analysis of gang-related films and gang behaviors is the content of news reports from various news agencies around the country. Over thirty news articles were researched that included reported gang activities and Hollywood portrayal of gang-related films. The articles were gathered from the NewsBank database and various internet news search engines (see Appendix C).

The two films that had received the most press in the data collection were the 1988 film *Colors*, and *Boyz N the Hood* which was released in 1991.

The impact and implications of these films resulted in cinemas around the country refusing to show the film, shootings took place inside and around the theatre, and riots resulted. However, *Colors* (1988) and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) are not the only controversial films to receive media attention. Other gang-related films such as *Scarface* (1983), *New Jack City* (1991), *Juice* (1992), and *Belly* (1998) have all been discussed in the news media as films that could potentially cause serious gang violence in the neighborhoods. *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) was banned in England for some time and the producers of *The Warriors* (1979) found themselves in the Massachusetts State Supreme Court defending the film because of a fatal stabbing of a youth where another youth used techniques portrayed in the film.

Boyz N the Hood (1991) precipitated a number of gang-related shootings around the country that killed two and left at least thirty-five others injured (Newsweek, 1991). The effects of *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) were clearly harmful. In Minnesota, six people were wounded as the result of a gang fight in a theater. When police interviewed members of the two rival gangs involved, the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords, both indicated that film “fired them up” and the shooting was noted by police as a spontaneous reaction after “the exchanging bad looks” with each other (Bryant, 1991). Other incidents included a riot in Racine, Wisconsin, various gang-related shootings in California, and gang fights in states such as Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Alabama, Texas, Nevada, and Illinois (Lancaster 1991). The screening of *Boyz* and the violence that followed resulted in increased security by as much as 60% at cinemas (Becker 1991).

Meanwhile, *Colors* (1988) prompted the shooting of one gang member and the injuring others. David Dawson, 19, of Stockton, California was killed when a rival gang member shot him in the back of the neck. The bullet exited through his body and also struck an innocent bystander (Alim, 1988)

New Jack City (1991) has also been blamed for its share of violence, including a fatality. This film fueled gang-related incidences in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Las Vegas. In New York City, chaos, panic, and a shooting spree resulted in the death of a 19-year old Brooklyn resident (Barnhill, 1991). In the Detroit Metropolitan area, two youths were shot outside a local theater (Balley & Ingersell, 1991).

While *Colors*, *New Jack City*, and *Boyz N the Hood* were financially successful, other popular gang films that received less media coverage and financial success, but still resulted in controversy were *Juice* (1992), *Menace II Society* (1993) and *American Me* (1992). The film *Juice* (1992) was associated with various shooting, knifing, and other violent acts. The New

York Times (1992) reported that the films marketing strategy prompted violence among young black males because of the controversial poster and tag line for the film. The original *Juice* poster depicted four black men in an implicitly violent pose (holding a gun) and displayed the colors of two Los Angeles rival gangs (blue and red) with the tag line reading "Power. Respect. Juice. How far will you go to get it?" Later, the producers of the film removed the violent pose and offered to pay for extra security at theaters (Fox, 1992).

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, two teenagers robbed and killed a motorist only to blame their actions on viewing the film *Menace II Society* claiming it "hyped them up" (Hollywood Reporter, 1993). Finally, the Latino gang film *American Me* fueled outrage among Mexican-American gang members, specifically La Emme, the Mexican Mafia, about the accuracy of the film. Director, producer, and main character Edward James Olmos was the apparent target of many threats for inaccurately depicting the organization. Critics also claim that three crewmembers were killed because of their involvement in making the film (De La Pena, 1997).

Conclusion

It is evident from the content analysis of news reports, interviews with law enforcement officials and gang members, and the analysis of gang-related films that gang behavior can be attributed to the elements in social learning theory. While Hollywood's gang-related films can glorify what life is like in a gang, these films also provide young "wannabees" with an acceptable way to achieve glory and success (Yablonsky, 1997). As gang behavior is defined through actions in a film, new techniques of delinquent and criminal acts are learned. As Akers (1997) points out, differential-associations provide role models whom gang members may emulate in a process described as imitation.

A gang film is also able to show other potential and current gang members how things are done in different parts of the country. For example, the film *The Warriors* (1979) informed the public of the existence of street gangs in New York City, while *New Jersey Drive* (1995) focuses on the act of car-jacking and drive-by shootings. As noted in my interviews, and Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) interviews, *Colors* (1988) helped other gangs identify with Los Angeles' two largest rival gangs, the Bloods and the Crips. Maxson (1998) addresses the issues of "gang proliferation" and "gang migration;" but the responses of the interviewees indicate that Hollywood has played an influential role in fostering the images of gang activities by identifying characteristics such as gang colors, language and gang names.

It should be noted that while many gang films have been produced

only a few have reached the notoriety and publicity of such films as *The Warriors* (1979), *Colors* (1988), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), and *New Jack City* (1991) have received. It seems that the more powerful the story line and the more controversial the film; this in turn, will attract more attention to gang members.

The most significant finding to support the principles of social learning theory and differential-association are the responses from the law enforcement officials. These individuals have direct contact with gangs and are able to best determine if a specific technique in committing a crime is the result of a gang film. When new gang films are distributed to cities for viewing, law enforcement officials are very aware of the ramifications these films have on gang behavior and potential activities attributed to the film. As evidence of this, there were countless violent disturbances after films such as *Colors* (1988), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *New Jack City* (1991). In addition, officers who were interviewed discussed the need to increase security at cinemas when gang-related films are shown. As for the principles of social learning theory, the interviewed officers discussed specific incidences they had encountered which they felt were the result of leaning this in a gang film.

Gang movies are not the only influential films to affect youth's behaviors. Evidence of youths learning specific delinquent and criminal techniques can also be applied to non-gang related films. Most recently, the *Basketball Diaries* (1995) have been blamed for the shootings in Paducah, Kentucky and Littleton, Colorado (Associated Press, 1999). Others films such as *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Money Train* (1995) and *Point Break* (1991) have also been directly blamed for youths acting out what they had learned in those movies (see Wilson, 1992; Winston, 1992; Carlson, 1995; Schweizer, 1998).

Gangs are portrayed by the media through, books, news articles, music, and television; but it's the movies that seem to grab the attention of a gang member the quickest. The purpose of this paper was to show how the impact of the Hollywood's portrayal of gang-related films does affect the behaviors of gang members through the application of criminological theories. Obviously, understanding gang behavior is more complex than simply watching a gang-related film and blaming Hollywood for the gangs' activities. While there are many plausible reasons for the increase in gang violence, gang-related films should not be ignored. It seems clear from this analysis and Knox's (1999) conclusions that while Hollywood is simply providing a gang story, these films might be doing more damage than good.

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Appendix A: Questions for Gang Members

- 1 - At what age did you start getting involved in gang activities?
- 2 - What gang did you run with?
- 3 - Have you ever been convicted of a crime?
- 4 - Referring to movies, which gang-related Hollywood film best portrays gang life?
- 5 - Have you or anyone you know committed an delinquent or criminal act as the result of watching a movie?
- 6 - What else can you tell me about your experiences in a gang?

Appendix B: Questions for Law Enforcement Officials

To: All Law Enforcement Officials and those working with gangs

Statement of the Problem:

I am conducting research on the effects of Hollywood movies which have gang-related overtones and themes (i.e. gang wars, lifestyles, violent behaviors, etc.). I am looking at movies dating back to the 1950's up through today and trying to determine how much gang violence was either learned from the movies or is the movie a reflection of the actual gang violence. There has been considerable discussion blaming the media as a way in which delinquent youth gangs might learn violent behavior, but this area has not been extensively researched.

Does the department get concerned when movies that highlight gang violence come to your community?

Have you experienced gang violence as a direct result (an imitation) of a movie?

Do members of gangs ever cite or make reference to scenes in particular gang-related movies?

Which Hollywood movies seem to grab the attention of gangs?

My e-mail address is [address withheld]. I would greatly appreciate your response to those questioned above and any other information that you may find to be helpful in my research.

Thanks for your help!

Chris J. Przemieniecki
Ph.D. Graduate Student

Appendix C: News Reports

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Appendix D: Film References

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