

Gangs and Gang Violence in School

by

Janice Joseph

Abstract

Using a sample of 325 students this study examines the nature and extent of gang violence in two schools in a northeastern state. The study examined students' involvement with gangs, the characteristics of students who are involved with gangs, the relationship between gang involvement and violence in school, and respondents' perception of gang prevention measures in their schools. The results showed that significantly more students who were in gangs in comparison to those not in gangs were involved in violence either as victims or a perpetrator. Recommendations are included.

Introduction

Gangs are organized groups that are often involved in drugs, weapons trafficking, and violence. The presence of street gangs at school can be very disruptive to the school environment because they may not only create fear among students but also increase the level of violence in school (Laub & Lauritsen, 1998). Gang activity in many schools and communities seemed to hit a peak in the mid-1990s, leveling off and declining in the late 1990s in many areas. However, there has been an increase in gang activities in schools and communities during the 2003-2004 school year and today there is an upward trend in gang activity in many communities across the nation (National School Safety and Security Services, 2006). One of the biggest concerns facing school administrators, teachers, and support personnel is the presence of gangs on school campuses. The study examined students' involvement with gangs and gang violence in school.

Literature Review*Nature and Extent of Gangs in Schools*

Knox (2006) in a national study of K-12 public schools reported that respondents estimated that an average of 37 active gang members were in their schools and an average of 125 students were associating with gang members. The National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association (2005) reported that in the Midwest, gang activity around schools and college campuses has increased, gang members are recruiting in elementary, middle, and high schools, and children are often forced to join one gang for protection.

In 2003, a U.S. Department of Education study found that 21 percent of students reported that there were gangs in their schools. Of all the students surveyed, students in urban schools were the most likely to report the presence of street gangs at their school (31 percent), followed by suburban students and rural students, who were the least likely to do so (18 and 12 percent, respectively). However, no difference was detected between 2001 and 2003 in the percentages of students who reported the presence of street gangs, regardless of school location. Hispanic and Black students were more likely than White students to report the existence of street gangs in their schools in 2003 (37%, 29%, and 14% respectively). This pattern also held among students in urban schools and suburban schools. For rural students, the only significant difference was between Black students (22%) and White students (11%) (DeVoe, Peter, Kaufman, Miller, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2004)

Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) in their study on gangs in school stated that 7.1% of males and 3.6% of females reported gang participation. They also found that 28% of boys involved in gangs compared to 5% of other boys and 18% of girls in gangs compared with only 2% of other girls reported that they had been threatened with a knife or a gun in the current year in school. Howell and Lynch (2000) in order to obtain a more complete measure of gang presence in schools, examined two additional questions from the 1995 School Crime Supplements (SCS's) to the National Crime Victim Survey (NCVS). These questions were "Do any of the students at your school belong to a street gang?" and "What about gangs that don't have members attending your school . . . have any of those gangs come around your school in the past 6 months?" When these questions were combined for analysis, 37 percent of the students indicated the presence of gangs in their schools. They also found that 80 percent identified the gangs as having a name; spent time with other members of the gang (80 percent), and wore clothing or other items to identify their gang membership (71 percent). They also reported that

the students indicated that the gangs were involved in tagging or marking turf (56 percent) and violent gang activity (50 percent). In general, gangs are more likely to be present in schools that are located within central cities with populations between 100,000 and 1 million (Curry, Maxson, & Howell, 2001; Esbensen, 2000; Howell & Lynch, 2000).

Gang-Related Activities

There are several criminal activities that are associated with the gangs. These include turf wars, sale and use of illegal drugs, sale and use of weapons, and violence.

Gangs and Drugs

A major factor in gang violence is the sale and use of illegal drugs. The relationship between drug use, drug trafficking, and gangs has been the subject of much research and debate. The booming drug market of the 1980s and 1990s dramatically increased the incidence of gang-related crime and violence. The enormous profits at stake in the drug trade compelled gang members to risk their lives — along with the lives of others — in the struggle over drug turf (Howell & Decker, 1999).

The National School Safety and Security Services (2006) found that gang participants were much more involved with drugs than are other students. It found, for example, that 54% of male gang participants versus 9% of non-participants sold marijuana or other drugs in the last 12 months {42% and 4% of females, respectively} (National School Safety and Security Services, 2006). The respondents in Knox's (2006) study reported that 24 percent of students in their schools used illegal drugs regularly.

In 2003, 29 percent of all students in grades 9-12 reported that drugs were made available to them on school property. The percentage of students who reported that drugs were made available to them on school property increased from 24 percent in 1993 to 32 percent in 1995. Males were more likely than females to report that drugs were offered, sold, or given to them on school property in each survey year. In 2003, 32 percent of males reported the availability of drugs, while 25 percent of females did so. In 2003, Hispanic students were more likely than Asian, Black, and White students to report that drugs were made available to them {37 percent vs. between 23 and 28 percent, respectively} (DeVoe, et al., 2004).

Howell and Decker (1999) concluded from their analysis of gang research that gang members actively engage in drug use, drug trafficking, and violent crime. In other words, these problems overlap considerably. They argue that gang members are more likely than non-gang members to be

involved in drug trafficking and violence and that gang involvement appears to promote individual participation in violence, drug use, and drug trafficking. They also argue that although drug trafficking is strongly associated with other serious and violent crimes, gang member involvement in drug sales does not necessarily result in more frequent violent offenses. The availability of drugs on school property has a disruptive and corrupting influence on the school environment (Nolin, Vaden-Kiernan, Feibus, & Chandler, 1997).

Gangs and Weapons

Weapons are often widespread in environments where drug abuse and gangs are present. The presence of weapons at school can create an intimidating and threatening atmosphere making teaching and learning difficult and rather than relying on switchblades or hand-to-hand fighting, gang members were now using guns and automatic weapons to commit crimes. These weapons have significantly increased the number of gang-related homicides. Innocent bystanders are also more likely to be killed when these guns are used in a drive-by shooting (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

The National School Safety and Security Services (2006) reported that gang participants in its study were more likely than other students to have carried a hidden weapon other than a pocket knife (51% of gang involved boys versus 9% of others; 32% and 2% of girls). It also indicated that carrying a concealed weapon was strongly associated not only with gang participation but also with use of crack, heroin, cocaine, and other drugs. The 2005 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicated that nationwide, 18.5% of students had carried a weapon (for example, a gun, knife, or club) on 30 days preceding the survey. Overall, the prevalence of having carried a gun was higher among male (9.9%) than female (0.9%) students; higher among white male (9.7%), black male (9.4%) and Hispanic male (11.6%) than white female (0.9%), black female (0.9%), and Hispanic female (1.3%) students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006).

Gangs and Violence

Gang violence refers to those acts of violence perpetrated by gangs against innocent people, property, or other gangs. Gangs today, however, appear to be far more violent than in the past because of the widespread use of automatic and semiautomatic weapons. With gangs using deadlier weapons, and with their shootings claiming more innocent victims, gang violence can be considered a national crisis. In schools where they are active, they, therefore, can create a climate of fear and terror. Members can disrupt

a school by engaging in frequent fights with rival gangs or by intimidating teachers and other students. Within schools, students who are gang members are more likely to be more troublesome than those who are not involved gangs.

Knox (2006) reported that 42 percent of the students in the study indicated that there were gang fights near their schools a year prior to the study, 12 percent reported threats of violence that were gang-related in their schools, and 26 percent said that were gang shootings nearby their schools. Twenty-five percent of the schools reported a gang shooting near their school a year prior to the survey and 38 percent of the schools indicated that there are periodic conflict between gangs and students in the schools. The National School Safety and Security Services (2006) found that gang participants of both sexes are much more involved in violence such as physical, robbery, and fighting.

Howell and Lynch (2000), in their study on gangs in school, found that about two thirds of the surveyed students reported that gangs at school were involved in one or more of three types of illegal activities: violence, drug sales, or gun carrying. About one in five students (21%) said gangs were involved in two of the three illegal activities, and 40% of the students said gangs were involved in only one of these three types of activities.

Response to Gangs in Schools

In an attempt to control and prevent gang activities in schools, school administrators are taking various precautionary measures. These anti-gang programs and strategies include Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program, resource school officer,

There are also several programs that have been initiated in the schools. One such program is GREAT program which teaches students the importance of pro-social behavior. The curriculum stresses the negative impact of drugs and conflict, while simultaneously promoting the positive things young people can do for their communities and for themselves. Uniformed law enforcement officers teach a course to middle-school students and it covers a range of subjects including crime, victims, and rights, drugs/neighborhoods, cultural sensitivity/prejudice, and conflict resolution. An evaluation of this program indicates that students completing the GREAT program had more pro-social attitudes and lower rates of some types of delinquent behavior than students in the comparison group (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999).

Another aspect of the quest to make schools safe is the presence of the school resource officer on the school premises. The presence of these

officers, at least on a periodic basis, may make students feel less vulnerable to gang attack or threats to bring the problem to the attention of authority figures in the school. Their physical presence in school may in itself be enough to deter the exhibition of gang symbols, dress and behaviors.

Schools have also implemented metal detectors, surveillance cameras, school security personnel, locker searches, and school uniforms or a dress code. Some school administrators have turned to implementation of “zero tolerance” policies toward those who commit or threaten violent acts and engage in gang activities while at school. Some also have written policies against gang, gang activities, and the use of drugs on school property (Knox, 2006).

In the fiscal year 2000, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) launched the Gang-Free Schools Program that was intended to reduce youth gang crime and violence in schools throughout the nation. Four sites were selected through a competitive process to participate in the two phases of this program: Miami-Dade County, Florida, East Cleveland, Ohio, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Houston, Texas (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

Legislation establishing gun-free school safety zones, enhanced penalties for offenses committed on school grounds, anonymous crime reporting hotlines, and antiviolence curricula for students and school employees are measures adopted in schools in an attempt to reduce school violence and other disruptive acts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).

STUDY DESIGN

Methodology

Participants

In the spring of 2003, a study was conducted on gangs and gang violence in schools. The convenient sample of respondents was drawn from two public high schools in a northeastern state and a total of 325 respondents completed the questionnaires. Due to the nature of the study, random selection and assignment of the subjects was not possible. So the study utilized a convenience sample.

Procedure

Questionnaires were reviewed by school officials and once the sample of classes was selected for a given school, a date was agreed upon for the administration of the questionnaires. This date was determined in consultation with the school so that all selected classes would be available for interviewing. All interviews were conducted with the teacher present in the room. Once the

researcher had introduced the study and explained the procedures, the students completed the questionnaires at their own pace. Responses were confidential -- students were required not to put their names on their questionnaires. At the end of the interviewing period, all questionnaires were collected and put in an envelope, which was closed and labeled so as not to identify the class or the school. Most respondents completed their questionnaire within 40 minutes and additional time was given to those who needed more time to complete the questionnaires.

Measures

Socio-demographic Factors

Age was measured in years with a range of 14 to 17 years and over. Gender was dichotomized with 1 for male and 2 for female. Education was a four-category, ordinal variable consisting of 9th grade to 12th grade. Race/ethnicity was a four-category, ordinal variable: 1 for white, 2 for black, 3 for Hispanic, and 4 for other race/ethnicity.

Gang Presence

To determine the presence of gangs in school, the respondents were asked the specific questions about their schools. These questions were (a) Are there gangs in your schools? (b) What kinds of gangs are in your school? (c) Are there gang fights in your school? and (d) Are you a gang member?

Victimization

A victimization measure was developed using student responses to the following questions: (a) Have you been a victim of assault without a weapon in the last six months? (b) Have you been a victim of assault with a weapon in the last six months? and (c) Have you been a victim of robbery in school in the last six months?

Involvement in Violence

The involvement in violence measure was developed using student responses to the following questions: (a) Have you hurt someone in school in the last six months? (b) Have you assaulted someone in school without weapon in the last six months? (c) Have you assaulted someone in school with weapon in the last six months? (d) Have you robbed someone in school in the last six months?

Perceived Effectiveness of Security Measures

This was measured by asking students to evaluate the effectiveness of each security measure that was present in their schools at the time of the

survey.

Limitations of study

One limitation of the study is the sample was a convenient sample and does not represent all the students in the sample schools. Furthermore, since these schools were selected non-randomly, the results do not represent all secondary schools in that state. Despite these limitations, the results provide insights into students involvement in gangs in school.

Results

Basic descriptive statistics provide an overview of the data. Specifically, bivariate analyses focused on the relationships between the involvement in gangs, drug use, and gang membership and violence.

Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 325 respondents from the two secondary schools, 56 percent were male and 44 percent female. The average respondent was 17 years and over, black, and in Grade 12. This information is shown in Figure 1.

Students were asked a series of question to determine the presence of gangs in their schools. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who identified the presence of gangs in their schools. It is clear that the majority (87%) of the respondents perceived that there were gangs in their school and most reported that the gangs were Black (83%) and Hispanic (77%) gangs.

The data indicate that significantly more gang members than non-gang members were 17 years and over, were in Grade 12, were Black, and attended school A. Table 2 showed the characteristic differences between the gang members and the nongang members. The data show that there were significant differences between the gang members and non-gang members, with regard to age, race/ethnicity, grade, and school. There were no gender differences between the male and female involvement in gangs.

Respondents were asked about the availability of drugs and weapons in their school. The results indicate that 44 percent stated that they have used drugs in school and 22 percent said that they sold drugs in school. Table 3 shows that there were significant relationships between gang membership and the use and sale of drugs in school as well as the possession of weapons on school property.

There were two variables that measured violence in school. These were discussed in the Study Design section of this paper. The respondents were asked if they were violently victimized in school or they were perpetrators of violence in school. The results in Table 4 indicate significant differences between gang members and non-gang members on the three

victimization measures. Likewise, all the measures for *perpetrator of violence* show significant differences between gang members and non-gang members.

A composite variable (violence) was developed based on the participants' responses to the questions that measured "*victimization*" and the questions that measured "perpetrator of violence." The data showed that gang members exhibited a higher level of violence than nongang members as is shown in Table 5 and Figure 2. The data show significantly more gang members than non-gang members were involved in violence, either as victims or perpetrators.

The study also asked students whether the security measures taken in their schools were effective to prevent gang activities. Security measures in both schools included a prohibition of gang-related attire, security guards, metal detectors, hallway patrols, visitors' sign-in procedure, school police, and a camera in one school. The data show significant differences between gang members and nongang members except in relation to the prohibition of gang clothing. Fewer gang members than nongang members perceived the anti-gang members in their school were effective (see Table 6).

Recommendations

Gang violence destroys the school environment and jeopardizes the educational process. The school plays a central role in the socialization of a child and it is, therefore, critical that schools offer a safe environment for learning. In an attempt to deal with gang violence, schools should:

- * Adopt consistent enforcement of school policies and regulations and apply discipline in a timely, firm, and fair manner.

- * Adopt and enforce a code of conduct. This code should be written and should clearly explain school rules and infractions. It should be given to students and parents on enrollment and be displayed in various key areas in the school.

- * Establish the policy that gang presence (clothing and paraphernalia, as well as behavior) will not be tolerated. Activities that would be prohibited under this policy would be the flashing gang signs, shouting gang slogans, and writing gang graffiti on school or personal property.

- * Create disciplinary measures for perpetrators of gang violence. These measures should be consistent and should increase with the number or severity of infractions to demonstrate school's seriousness in preventing gang violence.

- * Make greater use of the criminal justice system (when necessary), by working together with law enforcement officers, courts, and corrections,

especially probation officers. Schools should encourage police officers to speak to the students about the negative risk factors associated with street gangs and offer positive alternatives through proven prevention and intervention programs. In addition, it is hoped that the exposure of students to law enforcement officers will foster a positive relationship between students and law enforcement officers.

- * Institute several measures to maintain the safety of pupils and school property. The most important tool is to first have a certified security professional do a comprehensive security survey of the school and its environments. Some of these security measures should include fences, burglar alarms; security guards; security gates on doors, metal detector, and cameras.

- * Establish innovative responses to gang on their premises. Such responses can include conflict resolution, behavior management in the classroom, peer group and mentoring programs, and incentive and reward systems for “acceptable” and “problem” behaviors,

- * Create initiatives and programs to involve parents so they can have an important role to play in gang violence prevention. It should provide parents with information about the indicators and consequences of gang involvement. The school should also promote collaboration between parents and schools by creating opportunities for parent involvement in the life of the school (for example, as classroom assistants).

- * Collaborate with the community to prevent gang violence on school campuses. This would include programs such as after-school programs which would keep youth constructively engaged when their families are unavailable, and provide them with attention from caring adults and good role models.

- * Create a warm and friendly environment in the school in an attempt to provide a climate that is conducive to learning. This requires the establishment of a positive school climate, effective security, and a coordinated effort between all school operations, staff, and students.

- * Schools need to play a critical role in not just identifying ‘high-risk’ youth, but also be a great conduit for connecting these youth to positive adults who work in after-school programs like the Boys and Girls Club. When such youths are identified early, they can be provided with positive role models who can divert them away from gangs.

Although the above recommendations cannot address all the complexities involved in gangs and gang violence in school, they offer, however, valuable strategies that may make gangs appear less attractive and help students to effectively resist the pressure to join.

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Conclusion

The presence of gangs in school seems to be increasing and this poses a persistent threat to the well-being and safety of pupils and staff. The purpose of this study was to examine the present and effects of gangs in school. The results of this study show that gangs were present in the schools in the study and that the presence of gangs was related to the violence in the school. The data also showed that anti-gang measures and strategies taken by the schools in the study were not effective in preventing gang activities on school premises.

Gang violence prevention necessitates that schools not only acknowledge the presence of gangs on their premises, but that they actively investigate the gangs, determine who the members are, what are their activities, and severely punish perpetrators who are involved in gang violence. It also requires gang training awareness training which must go beyond just knowing about colors and identifiers, and a focus on change in the organizational structures of schools. Finally, schools need to understand that gang prevention is multi-faceted and requires long-term strategies so that eliminating gangs from their premises will require patience and persistence.

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About the Author

Janice Joseph, PhD, is a professor of the Criminal Justice Program at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She received her Ph.D. degree from York University in Toronto, Canada. She is the Editor for *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice*. Her broad research interests include violence against women, women and criminal justice, youth violence, juvenile delinquency, gangs, and minorities and criminal justice. She has published books and numerous articles on delinquency, gangs, domestic violence, stalking, sexual harassment, and minorities and crime.