Documenting the Pilot: the Military Gang Perception Questionnaire (MGPQ)

by

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Abstract
Roughly 80% of all crimes were committed by members of criminal gangs, and many gang members have had military training. No prior research that addressed the effects of Military-Trained Gang Members (MTGMs) on the civilian community was identified. Using the current literature, interviews with gang investigators and MTGMs, and the practical experience of the researcher as a guide, the process of survey design was completed. The assistance of subject matter experts was used to develop and refine the survey for length, format, and scope, and the survey was developed for online distribution. Pilot data was collected. After data analysis, the MGPQ was modified and revised, resulting in the final draft of the survey for the study.

Roughly 80% of all crimes in communities throughout the United States were committed by members of criminal gangs (National Gang Intelligence Center [NGIC], 2009). The authors of a prior NGIC (2007) report found that gang-related activity in the Armed Forces posed a threat to both law enforcement officials and national security. The 2007 report identified many gang-related crimes committed by gang members in the military such as murder, racketeering, and drug distribution. Some gang members enlisted in the military as an alternative to incarceration, and others joined the military to recruit members into their gang, obtain access to weapons, and learn how to respond to hostile gunfire (NGIC). Much of the literature examining the history of gangs and the military was limited to a cursory examination based on news reports and limited or one-sided interviews (Knox, 2006). Though there was limited coverage of MTGMs in the literature, no research was identified that addressed the effects of MTGMs on the civilian community.

Literature Review

In 1992, Knox (2006) conducted an exploratory study of members of an Illinois National Guard unit. An incident involving the death of a child had occurred in a large public housing complex that was known for gang violence. The shooter, a gang member, had served in the military, and public officials had suggested the possibility that the National Guard could have been called to assist in suppressing the gang problem (Knox).

McMaster (1994) examined attitudes towards gangs on a military base in Arizona and found there was no significant difference regarding perceptions of the severity of the gang problem between ranks of the respondents. In the 1993 study, 63.5% of the respondents did not believe that gangs were a serious problem in their on-base or off-base neighborhoods. Few of the respondents reported direct contact with gangs, and 83.59% reported they had never been a target of gang violence (McMaster, 1994). Few significant differences were identified in how military personnel living on and off base responded to questions regarding their perceptions of the severity of a gang problem.

In 1996, members of a Department of the Army task force evaluated the effects of extremist groups, and reported that, "gang-related activities appear to be more pervasive than extremist activities as defined in Army Regulation 600-20" (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 1996, para. 16). In 1998, DoD leaders directed a follow up study to the task force report. Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) conducted the study and reported that gang members adversely affected the military in a variety of distinct ways. While there was no official accounting of the scope and nature of the problem, leaders of the individual branches of the military thought the problem was significant enough to publish gang identification manuals (Flacks & Wiskoff).

Flacks and Wiskoff (1999) recommended that Tierney's (1998) research on gang members and military acculturation should be expanded to include non-incarcerated personnel. Tierney examined self-identified gang members in military prisons. The interviews focused on reasons the gang members enlisted in the military and included: truthfulness with recruiters regarding prior arrests and criminal convictions, links to gangs and extremist groups, and reasons for lack of assimilation and acculturation in the military (Tierney). The top reason (37.1%) given for enlisting was to get a better life or get out of the current environment. Other reasons included avoiding death or jail as a result of the gang lifestyle, providing for family, and getting job experience (Tierney). None of the military gang members seemed to have had patriotism among their reasoning for enlisting in the military.

Eyler (2009) reviewed the threats posed by military gang members, examined military policies regarding gang affiliation, and made recommendations for new regulations. Gang members threaten unit order and compromise security. The critical news reports published after reported incidents of military gang activity were a threat to the public perception of the armed services (Eyler).

Army policies directed recruiters to balance competing interests, share information, and give discretion to the individuals most familiar with the applicant when determining whether the applicant should be allowed to enlist. Shortcomings in the execution of those policies undermined good intentions and lent support to critics' claims of lowered standards for recruitment (Eyler). This undermining occurred because of a dependence on the honesty of the applicant, deficient criminal records checks, inability of some recruiters to accurately identify gang members, and

the failure of military leaders to definitively identify the gang problem in the military (Eyler).

Survey Creation

After a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, no existing survey instruments for measuring the constructs in the study were found. Consequently, an instrument was specifically designed for the study. Using the current literature, interviews with gang investigators and MTGMs, and the practical experience of the researcher as a guide, the cover letter and survey questions was systematically drafted to create the MGPQ. The survey instrument consisted of three parts.

The first part of the instrument contained indicators to determine the perceptions of the respondents regarding the presence of MTGMs in their jurisdictions. This section contained the items that were summed to determine the score that formed one of the dependent variables. Those questions specifically referred to the respondents' knowledge and sources of knowledge regarding MTGMs in their jurisdictions.   A Likert-type scale was used, and each respondent was asked to respond to the series of statements by indicating their agreement as follows: 1 (strongly disagree; SD), 2 (disagree; D), 3 (have no opinion; NO), 4 (agree; A), or 5 (strongly agree; SA). One of the dependent variables was comprised of the sum of seven of those questions. Other questions were included to provide further descriptive information about gangs and their activities, but were not used to address the study's hypotheses.

The second part of the instrument was designed for demographic data for both the respondents' organization (e.g., jurisdiction size, proximity to a military installation, type of organization, and location) and the respondent (e.g., age, race, prior military service, and participation in anti-gang activities). The third and final part of the survey questionnaire was used to collect general written comments from the participants about their perceptions regarding the presence of MTGMs in their jurisdictions.

Subject Matter Expertise

Once the process of survey design was completed, the assistance of subject matter experts was requested to develop and refine the survey for length, format, and scope. The draft survey and cover letter were disseminated to several retired high-ranking military leaders, university professors with professional experience in gang investigations and activities, and law enforcement officials who were gang specialists for content validity. Those experts were asked to review the cover letter for face validity and adequate content along with face and content validity of the prospective survey. Each reviewer was provided with a form (Appendix A) that had several questions along with a comments section to help guide their evaluation of the documents. Once the reviewers finished, the recommendations and suggestions on the feedback forms were reviewed.

Piloting the survey

The survey for the research study was developed for online distribution. Once the survey preparation was completed, a pilot test was conducted to further validate and assess the reliability of the MGPQ. The survey instrument and cover letter were pilot tested with gang investigators who lived outside of the geographic area designated for data collection with the research study. The pilot study facilitated the process of determining the instrument's ease of use and provided quantitative data to conduct a reliability analysis for the instrument. The pilot test was conducted using an online survey of active members of the Northwest Gang Investigators Association (NWGIA).

The president of the gang association was asked for permission to collect the pilot data with the association members and the list of email addresses of current NWGIA members was provided. Each member on the list received an email containing the cover letter and the link to the survey instrument. At the time of the survey, the NWGIA had 641 members with active email addresses. Data were collected on 50 gang investigators who were members of the Northwest Gang Investigators Association. The following will present the results of the analysis of pilot data and the changes that were made to the survey as a result.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis and reliability analysis will be presented before descriptive statistics because changes were made to scale scoring based on the factor and reliability analyses. A principal axes factor analysis was performed on the 19 Likert scale items that were rated from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items had originally been scored in the opposite direction, but all items were reversed so that higher scores would be indicative of more agreement. This change will be sustained for the final survey. A varimax rotation was applied to the factor analysis.

Results indicated that six factors had eigenvalues greater than 1.0, but the scree plot indicated one solid factor explaining 26.86% of the total variance, whereas the other five factors were much smaller. The scree plot is presented in Figure 1. Thus, the seven items from factor 1 were identified as the "MTGM presence" items. These seven items and their factor loadings are presented in Table 1. Each item loaded greater than .50 on the factor.

Originally, three items (items 4, 5, and 6) were proposed to be used as a sum score for one of the dependent variables indicating MTGM increase. These three items loaded on the MTGM presence factor, but there were four other items that loaded as well. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability analyses were computed on the three original items and on the seven items that loaded on factor 1 from the factor analysis. The reliability for the three items was $= .80$, indicating good internal consistency reliability. However, the reliability for the seven items was even stronger: $= .88$. Thus, based on the factor analysis, and supported by the reliability

analysis, the seven items were shown to be a more valid and reliable measure of MTGM presence. Therefore, the dependent variable of MTGM presence based on Likert items was created by summing the scores of the seven MTGM presence items. This variable was used for the pilot analyses and will be used in the final study as well. The other 12 Likert items will be retained in the final study, and will be presented descriptively, but only the seven items from Table 1 will be used to form the dependent variable, MTGM presence.

A further change was made to focus the dependent variables on the present time. Thus, the dependent variables will not be used to assess an "increase" in MTGM presence, but rather, the dependent variables will be assessments of current MTGM presence. This change was applied for two reasons. First, after discussion, the researcher determined that asking participants to assess a percentage increase over the past 5 years was a difficult assessment that would likely not provide a valid or reliable measure. Second, the researcher determined that although the current study was designed to be a cross-sectional assessment taken at one point in time, further data could be obtained using these measures in the future; therefore, each time the assessment was taken, it should be taken as a measure of current presence. As a result of these changes, the final dependent variables will consist of (a) MTGM presence measured as the sum of the seven Likert items asking about military activities of current gangs, and (b) MTGM presence measured as an estimate of the percentage of current gang members who are MTGMs. The question about percentage increase in MTGMs was dropped.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for interval and ratio scale variables. As can be seen in Table 2, the question that asked about percentage of gang members who are currently MTGMs was answered by only a small number of participants (N = 19). To encourage greater participation in the final study, the statement "Please fill in the blank with your best guess even if you are unsure" was added to all open-ended questions.

To assess normality of each measure in Table 2, measures of skewness and kurtosis were computed for each measurement. Skewness and kurtosis values of zero are indicative of a normal distribution, and values between -2 and +2 signify no problematic deviations from normality (Balanda & MacGillivray, 1988; De Carlo, 1997; Groeneveld & Meeden, 1984; Hopkins & Weeks, 1990; Kendall, Stuart, Ord, & Arnold, 1999). The MTGM percentage item had measures of skewness and kurtosis that were outside of the acceptable range. Because of these deviations, nonparametric Spearman correlations were computed instead of the proposed Pearson correlations. If the final data deviate from normality, data transformations will be explored.

Table 3 presents frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. As can be seen in Table 3, changes to these variables were necessary. Nearest military installation, years of experience, and age were supposed to be used in the multiple regression analysis. Therefore, they needed to be measured on at least an interval scale, but they were measured ordinally on the pilot survey. The items were changed to open-ended questions asking for number of miles from the nearest military installation, number of years of experience, and exact age in years for the final survey. Thus, these measures will be ratio scale measurements for the final survey. Ethnicity and military experience will remain unchanged.

Tests of Hypotheses using Correlations

The original hypotheses were tested by computing bivariate correlations between (a) the dependent variables (MTGM presence rating score and MTGM presence percentage score) and (b) the ordinal or ratio scale independent and control variables. Spearman correlations were computed instead of Pearson correlations for two reasons. First, the MTGM percent presence variable was not normally distributed and was thus not appropriate for use with parametric statistics. Second, the control variables (i.e., nearest military installation, years experience, and age) were measured on ordinal scales rather than interval or ratio scales and were thus also not appropriate for use with parametric statistics. Each hypothesis will be discussed in turn.

Null Hypothesis 1. There is no significant positive relationship between gang investigators' perceptions of the presence of MTGMs in their jurisdictions and the size of their jurisdictions. In the final study, size of jurisdiction will be computed by asking the respondents for the county in which they work and by then obtaining census population data for the counties. On the pilot survey, some participants used cities and others used counties; thus, the information was not consistent across participants. Therefore, this first independent variable was not assessed for the pilot study.

Null Hypothesis 2. There is no significant positive relationship between the gang investigators' perceptions of the presence of MTGMs in their jurisdictions and the gang investigators' level of participation in anti-gang activities. This hypothesis was assessed by Spearman correlations between the dependent variables (MTGM presence) and the independent variable: time spent on anti-gang activities. The correlation with the MTGM presence sum score was near zero (= .06, p = .69), but the correlation with MTGM percent presence score approached significance (= -.41, p = .08). However, this negative correlation was in the opposite of the hypothesized direction, and indicated that participants who participated less in anti-gang activities gave higher estimates of the percentage of gang members who were MTGMs.

Null Hypothesis 3. There is no significant positive relationship between gang investigators' perceptions of the presence of MTGMs in their jurisdictions and the

proximity of the gang investigators' jurisdiction to a military installation. This hypothesis was assessed by Spearman correlations between the dependent variables (MTGM presence) and the independent variable: nearest military installation. The correlation with the MTGM presence sum score was small and negative, = -.17, p = .312, and the correlation with MTGM percent presence score was even smaller, = -.06, p = .818. As mentioned previously, the ordinal measurement of distance from military installation was corrected for the final survey. This ordinal measure did not provide enough detail because the majority of the respondents (78.3%) were within 25 miles of a military installation.

In the original proposal, only three hypotheses were proposed; however, the researcher planned on also introducing several control variables and on computing a multiple regression to assess the predictive power of all of the independent and control variables in simultaneously predicting the dependent variables. The multiple regression analysis will not be computed on the pilot data due to problems with the measurement levels of several variables. However, correlations between the dependent variables and the control variables consisting of years of experience and age are presented in Table 4. Although these variables did not show significant correlations for the pilot data, the variables will be assessed on ratio scales for the final study, and their relations with the dependent variables will be formally tested with Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Table 4

Spearman Correlations between Dependent Variables and Independent/Control Variables

	DV 1 = MTGM presence sum score	DV 2 = MTGM presence percent score
Percent time spent on anti-gang activities	.06	-.41
Nearest military installation	-.17	-.06
Years experience	-.05	-.05
Age	-.16	-.10

Note. Pairwise deletion was applied; thus, sample sizes ranged from N = 17 to 43.

Independent t tests

Additionally, Hypotheses 6 and 7 will test for mean differences in dependent variables between the levels of the two dichotomously measured control variables (i.e., ethnicity and military experience). Using the pilot data, independent t tests were computed to compare mean levels of the dependent variables between (a) ethnic groups (minority vs. nonminority) and (b) military experience (yes vs. no). First, a comparison of minority (N = 8) and nonminority (N = 33) scores on the MTGM presence sum score was computed. Minority scores were noticeably lower (M = 17.88, SD = 7.22) than nonminority scores (M = 22.00, SD = 5.59), but this difference did not reach statistical significance, t(39) = -1.77, p = .08, although it was close. The comparison could not be conducted with the other dependent variable (MTGM percent presence) because there was only one minority member who answered the question.

Next, a comparison of scores for participants with military experience (N = 14) and participants with no military experience (N = 29) on the MTGM presence sum score was computed. Scores for participants with no military experience were a bit lower (M = 20.38, SD = 6.40) than scores for participants with military experience (M = 22.21, SD = 5.19), and this difference was not significant, t(41) = -0.93, p = .36.

Participants with military experience (N = 7) and participants with no military experience (N = 12) were also compared on their MTGM percent presence scores. Scores for participants with military experience were noticeably lower (M = 3.29, SD = 1.70) than scores for participants with no military experience (M = 8.00, SD = 8.33), but this difference did not reach statistical significance, t(12.52) = 1.89, p = .08, although it was close. The degrees of freedom for this test were modified because the test for unequal variances had to be computed.

Conclusion

Roughly 80% of all crimes were committed by members of criminal gangs (NGIC, 2009). Many of those gang members had military training. Though there was limited coverage of MTGMs in the literature, no research was identified that addressed the effects of MTGMs on the civilian community. After a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, no existing survey instruments were found. Using the current literature, interviews with gang investigators and MTGMs, and the practical experience of the researcher as a guide, the process of survey design was completed. The assistance of subject matter experts was requested to develop and refine the survey for length, format, and scope, and the survey was developed for online distribution.

The president of the NWGIA was asked for and granted permission to collect the pilot data with the association members. Each member received an email containing the cover letter and the link to the survey instrument. Data were collected on 50 gang investigators who were members of the NWGIA. After data analysis, the

MGPQ was modified and revised, resulting in the final draft of the survey for the study (Appendix B)

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About the Author

Carter F. Smith, J. D., Ph.D. has been involved in military and federal law enforcement for over twenty-two years, and was the team chief for the Army's first gang and hate crime investigations team. He has provided training on gangs to the Florida, Georgia, Northwest, Oklahoma, and Tennessee Gang Investigators Associations, the Regional Organized Crime Information Center, the National Gang Crime Research Center, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS), the National Crime Prevention Council, the Southern Criminal Justice Association (SCJA), the Department of Justice, and the U.S. Army. He was a founding (Executive) board member of the Tennessee Gang Investigators Association and is a member of the Speaker's Bureau for the National Alliance of Gang Investigator Associations. He is a member of the CID Special Agents' Association, the ACJS, SCJA, and the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), a recipient of the CID Command Enlisted Special Agent of the Year award, and a recipient of the Frederic Milton Thrasher Award of the National Gang Crime Research Center.

Appendix A:

Expert questionnaire Questions:

1. Does the cover letter adequately introduce the researcher, the purpose of the study (along with goals and objectives), and the use of the data?
2. Are there clear statements regarding the participant's confidentiality, anonymity and option to not participate without negative consequences?
3. Is there a statement expressing that participation that provides the researcher with implied consent and subsequent use of the data for analysis?
4. Does the instrument look like a questionnaire?
5. Are the directions clear and precise?
6. Is the document easy to read and follow?
7. Does the questionnaire, as identified in the cover letter, encompass enough information to address the purpose and goals of the study?
8. Are the questions clear and concise with what they are requesting?
9. Is there a better way to obtain the information?
10. Are the questions appropriate for the intended audience?
11. Are there any ambiguous terms or acronyms that need to be explained?
12. Comments

Appendix B:Survey Instrument Military Gang Perception Questionnaire (MGPQ)

DIRECTIONS: Please choose the ONE best answer for each question, unless the directions indicate otherwise. If you need to change an answer, simply select the correct response for the question before submitting the survey. When applicable, definitions for the terms used in the survey should be understood as those used in your state. When questions refer to jurisdiction, consider that to be the area where you presently work. For the purpose of this questionnaire, a corrections facility is a jurisdiction. Please answer all the questions, and try not to leave any answer blank.The answer key is: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, NO = No Opinion, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Please rate the level to which you agree with the following statements:
SA   A   NO   D   SD

11.   There are gangs in my jurisdiction. (If you are unaware of any gangs in your jurisdiction, please answer this question and skip to the demographics section, starting with number 25.)

12.   A majority of the gang members in my jurisdiction are adults.

23.   Adult gang members are more dangerous than juvenile gang members.

34.   Gang members in my jurisdiction use military or military-type weapons.

45.   Gang members in my jurisdiction use military equipment (explosives, body armor, night-vision, etc.).

56.   Gang members in my jurisdiction use military-type tactics.

67.   Gang members in my jurisdiction commit home invasions.

78.   Gang members in my jurisdiction commit armed robberies.

89.   It appears that one or more of the gang leaders in my community demonstrate military training in terms of their leadership.

910. Some of the individual gang members in my jurisdiction appear to have no ties to local gangs.

111.   Some of the gangs in my jurisdiction have ties to gangs in distant jurisdictions.

112.   There are gang members in my jurisdiction that currently serve in the military.

113.   There are gang members in my jurisdiction that have served in the military in the past.

114.   Military-trained gang members pose more danger to police than other gang members.

115.   Active gang members should NOT be allowed to join the military.

116.   Anti-gang prohibitions (legislation, injunctions, ordinances) are being used in my jurisdiction.

117.   Anti-gang prohibitions (legislation, injunctions, ordinances) limit/would limit the majority of gang activity in my jurisdiction.

118.   Anti-gang prohibitions (legislation, injunctions, ordinances) limit/would limit the activity of military-trained gang members.

119.   Military representatives advise our department when gang members are discharged from the military.

The following questions relate to military-trained gang members in your jurisdiction. If you are unaware of any military-trained gang members in your jurisdiction, you may skip to the next section (starting with number 25) and complete the demographic questions prior to submitting the survey.

20. Which of the following branches of the military are currently represented by the gang members in your jurisdiction? (Choose all that apply)

    Regular Army Army Reserve Army National Guard Marines   U S M C Reserve   Air Force   Air Force Reserve   Coast Guard Coast   Guard Reserve   Navy   U.S. Navy Reserve

21. Which of the following street gangs are represented by the military-trained gang members in your jurisdiction? (Choose all that apply, and if you choose other, please identify the primary gangs)

    Bloods Crips   Gangster Disciples   Vice Lords   Mara Salvatrucha   1 8 Street   Latin Kings   Other

22. How did you become aware of the gang members' military affiliation? (Choose all that apply, and if you choose other, please identify the answer)

O Personal interview
O Other police officer
O Non-law enforcement credible source
O Non-law enforcement source with unknown credibility
O I am not aware of this

23. What types of crimes were the military-trained gang members suspected of committing? (Choose all that apply, and if you choose other, please identify the primary crimes)
O Drugs
O Sexual Assaults
O Assaults
O Weapon Smuggling
O Homicides
O Robberies
O Other (Please specify)
O I have not encountered a military-trained gang member

   Approximately what percentage (out of 100%) of gang members in your jurisdiction are military-trained gang members? (Please fill in the blank with your best guess even if you are unsure)
_____%

The following are demographic questions (Please choose only 1 answer for each multiple choice question):

25. At what level of government is the organization you work for?
O Local   O State   O Federal   O Military   O Private Sector
O Other

26. What is your primary role in the community? (if more than one applies, please choose the primary area only)
O Police
O Corrections
O Courts/Law
O Homeland Security
O Private Security
O Probation/Parole
O Working with Juveniles
O Social Work
O Other: _____

27. In what type of Agency do you work?
O County Police
O County Sheriff
O City/Town Police
O College/University Police
O State Law Enforcement
O Federal Law Enforcement
O Airport Police
O School Police
O Private Sector
O Military Police/Investigations
O State Corrections (even if Private)
O Federal Corrections (even if Private)
O Other: _____

28. Approximately what percentage of your time (out of 100%) in your job is spent on organized anti-gang activities? (Please fill in the blank with your best guess even if you are unsure)
_____%

29. How long have you been involved in these anti-gang activities in a paid law enforcement capacity?
(Please use whole numbers for years, and round up if needed without including fractions or decimals to represent months. If not working in a paid capacity, please write 0. Please fill in the blank with your best guess even if you are unsure)
_____

30. How close is the nearest military base or Reserve/Guard unit to your jurisdiction? (Please use whole numbers for miles, and round up if needed without including fractions or decimals to represent less than a mile. Please fill in the blank with your best guess even if you are unsure) _____

31. Does your department/organization have a working relationship with military investigative authorities?
 (e.g., Army or Marine CID, Naval CIS, Air Force OSI, Military Police or Security Forces).
O Yes   O No

32. In what county (regardless of whether you work in City, County, Federal, or other agency) are you assigned in an anti-gang capacity? (Answer NA if you are not working in an anti-gang capacity)
_____

33. What city and state do you primarily work in? (If you work in Corrections, please note the name of the facility, too).
_____

34. How many officer are employed by your department/organization? (If you work in Corrections, please identify the number of corrections officers/personnel. Please fill in the blank with your best guess even if you are unsure).
_____

35. What is your current age? (Please use whole numbers for years)
_____

36. What is your race/ethnic background?
O African American/Black
O Asian
O Caucasian/White
O Hispanic/Latino/Latina
O Native American
O Pacific Islander
O Other: _____
O Declined to state

37a. Have you ever served in the United States Military?
O Yes
O No

37b. If you answered Yes to question 37a, what Branch? _____
37c. Please identify the time frame and location (s) _____

38. Please provide any feedback or comments that you feel are important regarding the presence of gang members in the military or gang members that were formerly in the military. Your feedback is very valuable and appreciated. If you are expanding on or clarifying your response to a question(s), please preface your response with the question number.

Thank you for your participation