

Adolescent Males' Perceptions of Gangs and Gang Violence

by

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Abstract

Gang violence is an escalating public health problem in the US. This study explored adolescent males' experiences with gangs and gang violence, from their perspectives of the adolescents, their parents, and community center employees. A qualitative design was used to explore perceptions of adolescents' experiences gangs and gang violence. Adolescents, their parents, and community center employees were asked to participate in the study. Ten adolescents, their parents, and six community center employees participated in the study. Adolescents, parents, and community center employees had different perceptions of gangs, gang violence, and adolescents' experiences with gangs. These adolescents were exposed to gang violence in their neighborhoods; indeed, it was a constant presence in their lives. Their perceptions of gangs and gang violence influenced the adolescents' security and ability to socialize with friends.

Gangs have had a constant presence in the US since the late 1800's (Miller, 1974). The ability of gangs to thrive in society has led researchers to examine the gang members join gangs and engage in violence (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1995). However, it is also important to understand the perceptions of gangs and gang violence from non-gang affiliate adolescents. These adolescents may hold a different perspective from adults and those affiliated with gangs.

Adolescents have numerous reasons for joining gangs. Lack of employment or monetary resources, social isolation, and lack of involvement in activities often influence the decision to seek out relationships with adolescents in gangs. Further, lack of a positive adult influence can force adolescents to search for another family, a family where they are accepted (Yablonsky, 1997). These adolescents are able to

find acceptance in gangs that they did not find in their community. Thus, gang life can often be seen as a positive alternative to adolescents' previous situations. The gang provides them with status, friendship, activities, protection, and money, things they did not have before. All this can influence their participation in gang activity (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Another reason adolescents gravitate towards gangs is that the gang offers them a chance to release their feelings. The atmosphere in the gang provides adolescents with opportunities to let go of the hostility and aggression they have towards society for not accepting them, the release of those emotions ultimately lead to violence (Yablonsky, 1962). Indeed, violence is a part of gang members' life.

Gang members engage in violence for several reasons. Protecting the cohesiveness of the group is one reason. Members use violence as a means of defense against external threats, which may include other gangs that attempt to infringe on their "turf" or surroundings (Klein, 1995; Thrasher, 1936; Winton, 2004; Yablonsky, 1962). Gang members also use violence to command respect and promote their image in the gang and the community. Further, violence is used as a way of enacting revenge or retaliating against rival gang members or anyone who has shown disrespect or disloyalty to the gang (Grossman & McNair, 2003). Because of the varying reasons for participating in gang violence, there are differing views of who the victims of violence are.

In an early analysis, Thrasher (1936) suggested that victims of gang violence were rival gang members or their friends, people of different ethnic backgrounds, authority figures, family members, and neighbors. Later, however, Klein (1995) found that victims were usually young males of similar background, residing in low-income areas. Gang violence affects those directly victimized, and it can also have a negative influence on those indirectly exposed to it in the community (Barkin, Kreiter, & DuRant, 2001; DuRant et al., 2000).

Gang violence affects people both physically and mentally (Lee, 1997; Spergel & Grossman, 1997). Numerous studies have explored adolescent exposure to community violence (DuRant et al., 2000; Farver, Xu, Eppe, Fernandez, & Schwartz, 2005) and the influence that exposure to violence can have on adolescents; however, few researchers have focused on adolescents' perceptions of gang violence.

Understanding adolescents' perceptions of why youth join gangs and participate in gang violence is important because they may have different views from adults about the influence of gangs and gang violence in their neighborhood. This study therefore explored non-gang affiliated African American males' perceptions of gangs and gang violence.

Methods

Design and Sample

A qualitative research design was used to explore adolescent males' experiences with gangs and gang violence, from the perspectives of the adolescents themselves, their parents and community center staff. A parent was defined as a person legally responsible for an adolescent under the age of 18. Ten adolescent males and their parents, and six community center employees were recruited through personal invitations from the author. In order for adolescents to participate, they had to be between the ages of 11 and 17, in the 6th grade or higher, be exposed to gang violence within the last 2 years, and have no current association with a gang. The adolescent's parent also had to participate. The only criterion for participation of parents was inclusion of their son in the study. To be included, community center employees had to have direct interactions with the adolescents, be currently employed and have worked at the center for at least 6 months. After a participant adolescent identified an employee with whom he had a relationship, the employee was invited to participate. The study was approved by the University of Kentucky's Institutional Review Board and the city's Parks and Recreation Department. All participants in the study were given a \$10.00 gift card to Wal-Mart at the completion of the study.

Data Collection

A semi-structured guide was used to collect data from the participants. Ice breaker questions were used to engage the participants in conversation; then the guide focused on adolescents' experiences with gangs and gang violence. Sample questions included these: Why do you think people join gangs? Why do you think gangs participate in violence? Tell me about your experiences with gangs. How do you think gang violence can affect your life at home? How do you think gang violence can affect your friendships with other kids?

The interviews were held at the community center in a private room. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was tape recorded. Data were collected until saturation occurred. Data trustworthiness was established through member checks and peer debriefing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The Atlas Ti program (Berlin, Germany, 2003) was used to manage the qualitative data. Each participant was given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Findings

Sample Characteristics

Ten adolescent males, ten parents, and six community centers employees participated in this study. These adolescents were African-American with an average age of 14 (SD = 1.9) and in the 9th grade. The ten parents were African-

American women with an average age of 36 (SD = 5.4). The majority of the employees were female (n = 4).

The majority of adolescents (n = 9) lived with only one parent. They all participated in after school activities, such as basketball or football. In addition, they engaged in after school tutoring at the local community center.

Themes

As participants in the study described adolescent experiences with gang violence and their ideas of why adolescents joined gangs, two themes emerged: confusion, and motivating factors.

Confusion These adolescents were confused about what gangs are and why gang members participate in violence. Some adolescents had discussed their confusion with community center employees. Ms. Bell, one community center employee, said, "I think kids identify gangs by the color that they wear or something. It really might not be a gang but that is the way the kids come back and tell me about it..."

She also said,

Sometimes you see a group of kids that is doing bad stuff and not in a gang but just acting a fool, but they have come back to say they have seen a group of kids might jump on another kid, so to them it is a gang.

Mr. Smith elaborated on the confusion adolescents had in defining gangs and gang membership:

A lot of them has never been in a gang so it is like a group of them that grew up together, to me they are not a gang, but I guess they were called a gang, to me it is like a group of them that grew up together and they just stick by one another and do dumb things together and a lot of people consider that a gang...

Wayne, an adolescent, suggested that gangs differed from other groups. He maintained that

...if you are known in the community, everybody knows you. It's not really called a gang, it might be called a clique, gangs and cliques, cliques are like people or clan, in a clique, like, someone is going to be there help you, gangs make money playing basketball and trying to get ahead...I think most people get that confused with a gang or clique, two different standings.

Clearly adolescents and community center employees had differing opinions of what a gang was. Several adolescents in the study were associated with gang members because of the area in which they lived. Pete said,

From the outside looking in, somebody would say I'm in a gang, but I don't hang with them, it is just more of the fact where I live at, so they think, well if you live over there you in a gang... because you know,

like I said, me living where I live... people expect me to be in gangs...
a lot of people jump to the conclusion from where I live.

Mr. Smith believed that Evan also was identified as a gang member because of where he lived. He said, "If you live there and you hang out there you're in the dime blockers, and I promise ... just because you live in the area, you are associated with a gang." Mr. Smith and Pete both recognized that people hold differing perceptions about who joins gangs. They acknowledged that gangs were present in the neighborhood; however, just because Pete and Evan lived in certain neighborhoods did not mean that they were in a gang.

Motivating Factors

Adolescents are motivated to join gangs for a variety of reasons, ranging from fear to protection. Community center employees interviewed in the study also noted fear as a motivating factor for gang membership. Ms. Bell, for example, suggested, "...kids try to get in with that gang, just to keep from getting beat up...". She also believed that, "...it is a fear that I see in kids, gangs and people asking them to get in gangs and stuff, so they might be threatened to be in gangs." Ms. Rich agreed with Ms. Bell's perceptions. She said, "You've got some kids that go to the gangs that don't want to be in the gangs but they are scared...."

Adolescents acknowledged that there were various motivations for joining gangs and participating in violence. Evan thought "intimidation" was one reason adolescents joined gangs. Several other adolescents said that respect was a factor motivating teenagers to join gangs. Sam suggested that people joined gangs "to make themselves look good." He also believed that, "When they were little they saw a lot of violence...they think that they can do whatever they want to and maybe make themselves a legend." Pete said,

It is more of a pride thing and them wanting to be respected. A lot of people want respect but everybody's definition of respect is different, so they might take respect as being scared and so violence is the way they make people scared of them.

According to Wayne, gang members participated in violence "because they have to prove themselves." Greg said that violence was a part of gang activity "because someone is there for them, like if somebody jumps on them they fight back." These adolescents perceived that protecting one's reputation and looking for respect were important factors in gang involvement.

Acceptance was considered another important reason for joining gangs. Pete suggested that they need to be loved... a lot of people who is in gangs, are like the ones who lost their mother or had a drug addict in the family, may be neglected or something like that. I think gangs are like somewhere where you can always get that love, but at the same time, you are going to need to feel wanted, so you going to do whatever they say, you know, to be one of them.

This need for acceptance was also voiced by Patrick, who said that people joined gangs “to fit in...”. Several participants felt that gangs were like family for many adolescents. Ms. Bell noted that “Most of them are family and might could call a family a gang too.” Similarly, Wayne thought people joined gangs “because they need family.” Patrick’s mother said that “A lot of kids are easily misled. They feel like when they are in gangs, they are their families.” Thus these adolescents, parents, and community center employees all felt that fear, acceptance, protection, intimidation, and the need for “family” influenced adolescents’ gang involvement.

Discussion

Many of these adolescents suggested that the decision to join a gang and participate in violence stems from adolescents’ lack of acceptance and their need for love. There was a general perception that gangs provide a welcoming environment for those seeking acceptance. These participants also thought that enhancing one’s reputation and garnering respect from others influenced adolescents’ decision to join a gang and take part in violence. Several adolescents commented that intimidation and proving themselves through the use of violence would enhance gang members’ reputation. Most of these adolescents felt that gang membership promoted self-image, respect, acceptance and a sense of belonging.

Some community center employees, however, suggested that adolescents joined gangs because they were scared not to join. That is, adolescents’ fear for their own safety outweighed their hesitation about belonging to a gang. Others have found similar factors affecting adolescents’ decision to join gangs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1995; Kyriacou, Hutson, Anglin, Peek-Asa, Kraus, 1999; Winton, 2004).

Many of the adolescents were open about their experiences with the employees at the community center. This is not surprising since they were at the center every day and they may have felt comfortable discussing experiences with community center employees with whom they had developed close relationships. Also, the employees may not have judged or restricted the adolescents as parents would, because they did not have that kind of control over the adolescents.

Adolescents’ relationships with their peers are an important part of their development (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein, 1998), and can influence the values and behaviors they consider important (Salmivalli, 2002). These adolescents had differing interactions with their peers. Some were outgoing and friendly with everybody, while some tried to avoid certain people. Some of the adolescents in the study wanted to fit in with their peers and participated in activities to facilitate that, including wearing particular pieces of clothing and participating in activities considered inappropriate.

The use of a convenience sample of adolescents could have influenced these findings; however, multiple sources were used to enhance the credibility of the

findings (Creswell, 1998). Other limitations of the results included the cultural differences between the author and the participants, which could have affected their responses. Future research should use an interviewer who has an ethnic background similar to that of participants.

Given the lack of clarity about what gangs are and what factors attract adolescents to gangs and gang violence, additional research is needed in this area. This study found that parents and adolescents differed in their perceptions of exposure to gang violence, and this difference also needs study. Many adolescents and parents were aware of the influence peers have on adolescents' experiences. However, investigations of the relationships among peers, adolescents, risky health behaviors, and interest in gang membership are needed to better understand adolescent gravitation towards gangs and gang violence.

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