

# **Gender and Gang Membership: Testing Theories to Account for Different Rates of Participation**

by

David Brownfield

University of Toronto Mississauga

## ***Abstract***

*In this paper, the factors which may influence different rates of male and female membership in gangs are assessed. These factors are drawn from a review of three criminological theories: social control theory, differential association, and opportunity theory. We find empirical support for each of these three theories in terms of proposed correlates of gang membership. Further, we find that different rates of membership by gender are accounted for fully by variables based on the three theories.*

Female participation in gangs has been the subject of study for many years, with several researchers finding female membership becoming more frequent or common relative to male membership or participation (Miller, Maxson, and Klein, 2001). Most studies still find that males have substantially higher rates of gang membership than do females; however, the reasons for this pattern are still not clearly identified. The role of females in gangs remains largely ignored or often it is assumed that female gang members only function as an auxiliary to the full membership and participation of male gang members. Miller (1998) observed that females may have the motivation to join gangs as a means of protection or reduction of risks in some neighborhoods; Miller found this was an unlikely outcome, however, for females joining gangs, since female gang members have higher rates of victimization than do female non-gang members (see also Newbold and Dennehy, 2003).

While drug use (Sirpal, 2002) has been associated with gang membership, some more specific hypotheses may still be tested about drug use. Apecifically, do people join gangs to obtain access to serious drugs such as cocaine and heroin? (Marijuana and alcohol are more widely available than these more serious drugs, and hence likely would not require gang associations to obtain them.)

Risk-taking or thrill seeking (Warr, 2002) has been hypothesized to be a motive for joining gangs or involvement in group delinquency. Control theories, such as Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory, have acknowledged the pursuit of risk as a cause of delinquency.

In this paper, the explanations for different rates of gang membership for males and females will be explored, with a focus on differential association and control theories, as well as opportunity theory factors and predictions based on these various theories. Deviant definitions and the effect of peer delinquency on gang membership will be assessed as predicted by differential association theorists. Measures of attachment and commitment as well as pursuit of risk will also be considered in predictions based upon control theories. We also explore the effects of serious drug use (or cocaine) on the likelihood of joining a gang, based primarily on opportunity theory.

Gang delinquency was once a primary focus among anomie and subcultural theorists in criminology. Anomie theorists such as Cloward and Ohlin focused on subcultural variations in crime, hypothesizing that different opportunity structures produced different manifestations or types of crime (ranging from violence to gambling to drug use); however, these typological and specialization approaches have rarely been empirically supported (Williams and McShane, 2004). Individual level or processual theories such as social control theory and differential association theory have become more dominant than the structural theories such as anomie theory.

Revisions of anomie theory (including Agnew's general strain theory) and Messner and Rosenfeld's institutional anomie theory) focus more on individual characteristics and processes. These more recent versions of anomie theory incorporate elements from differential association and social control theories, such as social reinforcement for deviant acts and family bonds which may inhibit delinquency and gang involvement. Thus, most criminologists seem to agree that processual or individual level dynamics identified by differential association and social control theories are most likely to affect the likelihood of involvement in deviant behavior.

Differential association theorists have emphasized peer relationships and the acquisition of deviant "definitions" that justify or encourage crime and delinquency. The "techniques of neutralization" described by Sykes and Matza (1957) include typical excuses and justifications ("everyone does it"; "the victim deserved it"; "no one was really hurt," etc) that nearly all of us are familiar with, and

many have used these neutralizations themselves. The concept is useful and widely supported in the empirical research (Williams and McShane, 2004).

Other theories, notably social control theory and various versions of subcultural theory (Kreager, 2009; Brownfield, 2010) have also incorporated the concept of deviant “definitions” or what control theorists such as Hirschi (1969) refer to as “beliefs.”

Liska and Messner (2002) observed that the overlap between differential association and social control theory is most clearly illustrated by the similarity of the concepts of “definitions” and “belief.” This overlap or similarity may allow for a limited, “conceptual” integration of the two theories, which are otherwise very different in basic assumptions. For example, while control theorists assume that humans are by nature inclined to be destructive and inclined to harm one another, the differential association theorists assume human nature can be characterized as inherently social or inclined to cooperate with one another.

### Opportunity Theories

Several criminological theories have pointed to opportunity to commit crimes as an essential causal factor; among these theories are Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) version of anomie theory, routine activities theory, and Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) version of social control theory. Associating with others who traffic in serious drugs such as cocaine and heroin likely increases substantially the opportunities to commit these offences. Cloward and Ohlin believed that opportunity structures for crimes were organized around certain typical offences, such that profitable gambling and other lucrative crimes such as extortion are concentrated only in certain areas; “conflict” or fighting gangs might be confined to only certain neighborhoods as well. Gottfredson and Hirschi dispute this conception of offence “specialization” among offenders, and they argue that involvement in crime is general (the typical offender may be involved in theft, drug use, and violence nearly simultaneously).

Routine activities theorists such as Cohen and Felson argued that the presence of suitable targets (victims or property) is a key aspect affecting the likelihood of crime. In other words, opportunity in terms of victims to assault or take advantage of (or property to steal) is hypothesized to vary significantly across neighborhoods. Auto theft is more likely in middle class neighborhoods than in poor neighborhoods just because of the greater prevalence of targets or cars to steal. It could be argued the class distribution of crime and delinquency is affected significantly by opportunity levels for theft, which yield higher than expected property crime rates in middle class neighborhoods. Some believe that drug use is significantly facilitated by the resources available to middle class children. Chambliss (1967) pointed out that middle class youth have greater mobility with access to cars and they can thereby avoid detection or acquiring a delinquent

reputation.

### Data and Research Hypotheses

The data for the analyses in this paper are taken from a 2008 survey conducted in a large metropolitan area in Canada. More than five hundred ( $N = 521$ ) respondents completed questionnaires, with parental consent forms signed by guardians or parents. The survey was conducted in an area well known to local police for frequent and significant gang activity; this helped to insure an adequate number of subjects with a gang affiliation.

A set of research hypotheses designed to test the ability of theories to account for gender differences in gang affiliation or membership will be assessed:

- (1) Measures based on social control theory (including the concepts of attachment and commitment, in particular) are predicted to be associated with the likelihood of gang membership.
- (2) Measures based on differential association theory (including deviant definitions and peer delinquency) are predicted to be associated with the likelihood of gang membership.
- (3) Serious forms of drug use (in particular, cocaine use) are predicted, based on opportunity theory, to be positively correlated with gang membership.
- (4) Measures drawn from all three of these theoretical perspectives (differential association, control, and opportunity theories) will help account for gender differences in gang membership patterns.

### Findings

In Table 1, we present correlations between gender and gang membership with measures based on social control theory, differential association, and opportunity theory. First, we can observe a modest yet significant correlation ( $r = -.14$ ) between gender and gang membership. The somewhat higher rate of gang membership among males is consistent with the patterns reported in converging trends in gang affiliation for males and females.

Several independent variables (based on control theory, differential association, and opportunity theory) are also significantly correlated with gang membership. For example, peer delinquency is one of the strongest correlates of gang membership ( $r = .15$ ); note also that peer delinquency is significantly correlated with gender ( $r = -.16$ ), with fewer female respondents involved in friendships with young offenders than are male respondents. (This pattern may make peer delinquency a significant explanatory variable in assessing the lower rates of gang membership among females.)

Table 1. Correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) Between Gender, Gang Membership and Independent Variables

	Gang Membership	Gender
Gang Membership	1.00	-.14
Gender	-.14	1.00
Peer Delinquency	.15	-.16
Definitions	-.16	.09
Grades	-.10	.18
Attachment	.12	-.12
Cocaine	.14	-.14
Marijuana	-.08*	-.02*
Alcohol	-.02*	.01*

\* p > .05

A scale or index of measures of deviant “definitions” based on differential association theory was created. Four observed measures or items were used to form the latent variable of deviant definitions: (“It’s all right to get around the law if you don’t get caught”; “Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of”; “To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right”; and, “Most things people call ‘crime’ do not really hurt other people”). These four indicators of deviant “definitions” are similar in form to Sykes and Matza’s “techniques of neutralization” (for example, denial of injury, denial of the victim, etc). A latent class analysis was conducted and these four observed items (chi-square = 12.27, df = 10, p > .10) provide a good fitting model, indicating the observed measures can form a single scale or index. Like the findings on peer delinquency, we find that deviant definitions are significantly correlated with gang membership (r = -.16) and gender (r = .09).

Measures based on social control theory are also significantly correlated with gender and gang membership. For example, gender is significantly related to attachment, both to teachers and to parents. (An index of attachment was also created, based on measures of affection for parents and teachers; for example, some of the following items were used to construct the index: “Do you care about the opinion that your teachers have about you?” and, “Are you concerned that your parents would be hurt if you got into trouble with the police?”) Attachment to parents and teachers is a significant correlate of gang membership (r = .12), and females are found to have higher levels of attachment (r = -.12) than are males, a pattern that is consistent with social control theory. A measure of commitment or investment in conformity, school grades, is also significantly correlated with gender and gang membership. Those with higher grades (r = -.10) are less likely to be gang members, and female respondents have somewhat higher grades (r = .18) than do male respondents. Thus, both social control theory measures, as hypothesized, are

significantly linked to gang membership (and with gender).

We next assessed measures of opportunity theory, focusing on drug use (and the available opportunities or connections needed to obtain certain drugs, which may be affected by gang affiliations). We compared drugs relatively easy to obtain or nearly universally available (such as alcohol and marijuana) with cocaine use. Cocaine usage is positively correlated with gang membership ( $r = .14$ ), consistent with the opportunity theory argument that gangs facilitate access to serious drugs such as cocaine or heroin. Gender is also a significant correlate of cocaine use, with fewer female than male cocaine users. In contrast, neither alcohol ( $r = .08$ ) nor marijuana use ( $r = -.08$ ) are significantly associated with gang membership. Gender is also not significantly associated with either alcohol or marijuana use. Opportunity theorists would predict that such widely available substances such as alcohol and marijuana do not require any special access or organizational connections to obtain.

In Table 2, a logistic regression of gang membership on gender and independent variables from all three theories is presented. Most importantly, we find that gender has no significant effect on the likelihood of gang membership controlling for measures from all three theories. The gender difference in gang membership is accounted for fully by these independent variables. Consistent with prior research, peer delinquency ( $B = .55$ ) is one of the strongest predictors of gang membership. Only cocaine use ( $B = .62$ ) has a slightly stronger effect on gang membership, as measured by standardized regression coefficients. Both opportunity theory and differential association measures seem to be substantial predictors of the likelihood of gang membership. Deviant definitions ( $B = -.33$ ) also significantly remains as predictive of gang membership in our multivariate analysis.

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Gang Membership on Gender and Independent Variables.

	B	SE	p
Gender	-.36	.25	.14
Cocaine	-.62	.20	.001
Attachment	.30	.13	.02
Peer Delinquency	.55	.22	.01
Definitions	-.33	.08	.001
Grades	.06	.05	.20

Constant =  $-1.39$ ,  $se = .76$ ,  $p = .07$

(Chi-square =  $82.12$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .001$ )

In contrast, the social control theory measure of commitment (or school grades) ( $B = .06$ ) does not remain significantly associated with gang membership, holding constant the effects of the other variables. Attachment to parents and teachers ( $B = .30$ ) does remain a significant predictor of gang membership in the multivariate analysis.

## Conclusions

The findings from this study are consistent with all three of the criminological theories analyzed (differential association, social control, and opportunity theories). Holding constant the effects of measures based on these three theories, there is no significant correlation between gender and gang membership. Processes described by opportunity theorists, differential association, and social control theorists help account for gender differences in the likelihood of gang membership. For example, access to cocaine that may be facilitated by gang membership and may be a partial explanation for higher levels of gang membership among males.

Differential association and social control theory processes such as attachment and acquisition of deviant definitions at the individual level (as opposed to a structural level described by subcultural and anomie theorists) also seem to be crucial aspects of gender differences in gang participation. The overlap between the social control theory concept of “belief” and “definitions” (from differential association theory) should also be re-emphasized. Further research may help clarify how such beliefs or definitions are acquired, whether by association with peers or merely the lack of socialization by parents, teachers, and others. Additional theories or newer versions of theories such as self-control theory may also contribute to the explanation of gang membership and crime.

## REFERENCES

- Brownfield, David. 2010. “Lower Class Culture Theory.” Forthcoming in Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory, Ed. Frank Cullen and Pamela Wilcox. Newbury Park Sage.
- Chambliss, William. 1973. “The Saints and the Roughnecks.” *Society* 11: 24-31.
- Cloward, Richard and Lloyd Ohlin. 1960. *Delinquency and Opportunity*. New York: Free Press.
- Gottfredson, Michael and Travis Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press.
- Kreager, Derek. 2007. “When It’s Good to Be ‘Bad’: Violence and Adolescent Peer Acceptance.” *Criminology* 45:893-923.
- Liska, Allen and Steven Messner. 2002. *Perspectives on Crime and Deviance*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Miller, Jody. 1998. “Gender and Victimization Risk Among Young Women in Gangs.” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 35: 429-453.

- Miller, Jody, Cheryl Maxson, and Malcolm Klein. 2001. *The Modern Gang Reader*. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Newbold, Greg and Glennis Dennehy. 2003. "Girls in Gangs: Biographies and Culture of Female Gang Associates in New Zealand." *Journal of Gang Research* 11:33-53.
- Sirpal, Suman. 2002. "Familial Criminality, Familial Drug Use, and Gang Membership." *Journal of Gang Research* 9:11-22.
- Sykes, Gresham and David Matza. 1957. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review* 22:664-670.
- Warr, Mark. 2002. *Companions in Crime*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, Frank and Marilyn McShane. 2004. *Criminological Theory*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

David Brownfield is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto. He continues his research on gang membership and theories of gang crime, as well as research on violent crime and drug use.