

The Gang Officer's Perception: Measuring Intervention Propensity Among Gang Investigators

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Abstract

Intervention strategies are becoming more of a consideration in the gang reduction paradigm. Comprehensive gang reduction models necessitate the inclusion of intervention strategies designed to remove gang members and gang-prone youth and adults from current or potential gang membership. The growth of gangs and gang membership in North Carolina and the renewed focus on gangs have begged a comprehensive approach to reducing gangs within the state; however, the success of intervention strategies depend upon the support of law enforcement officers. The research entailed a survey of 204 gang investigators from across the state at a statewide conference. The results revealed that perceived gang presence and length of work with gang-prone populations were significantly correlated with intervention propensity. Length of work was also significantly related when controlling for confounding variables. Future directions and recommendations are also discussed.

Literature across criminological, sociological, and psychological disciplines has suggested the negative impact of gangs in the community. Effects on crime, juvenile delinquency, social and economic conditions within a community have been devastating and national assessments point out that gangs pose a serious threat to public safety. What was once considered to be a big city problem has stretched across urban communities and expanded into suburban and rural locations. Although this paper begins by identifying trends and patterns in gang prevalence over the past decade, it is important to note that early gang research identified contributing factors to the growth of delinquency and gangs that hold relevance in our society even today.

Gang studies from the early to middle part of the 20th century (Shaw and McKay, 1943; Cohen, 1955; Bloch and Niederhoffer, 1958; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Yablonsky, 1962, as cited in Knox 2009) had a heavy emphasis on sociological factors to explain the etiology of gang formation. Regardless of the many discrepancies with the language and definitions around what constitutes a gang, gang member, or gang activity, it is worthy to note that many of the causal factors for the onset of delinquency and gangs mentioned at that time are still prominent today, irrespective of the fact that the gang problem as a whole in America has become much different over the course of the last century.

In 1943, Shaw and McKay discovered areas with high rates of social disorganization gave way to higher rates of juvenile delinquency. In 1955, Cohen discussed delinquent subcultures resulting from social class inequalities and other psychogenic factors related to status, role or identity, and group loyalty. In 1958, Bloch and Neiderhoffer reported on the correlation between a youth's ability to smoothly transition into adulthood and likelihood of delinquency or gang involvement. In 1960, Cloward and Ohlin proposed the differential opportunity theory stating that when a youth lacks legitimate opportunities to achieve success then they will turn to illegitimate opportunities and those youth that have neither will resort to conflict or fighting as a way to attain status and success. In 1966, Spergel reported the following as primary causal factors for gangs: high unemployment, low income, struggle for security and decency, poor role models, social and economic deprivation, and status expectations. Fast forward to the present time and we see striking resemblances in the causal factors and attributes leading to gang involvement for today's youth and young adults.

Gang Prevalence over the Past Decade (2001-2011)

Most of our knowledge base regarding gangs comes from the vast volumes of field studies conducted from the 1920's onwards. These field studies, mostly consisting of field observations and interviews with gang members, provide extensive views of delinquent and nondelinquent behaviors exhibited by gang members through their own direct perspectives. On the other hand, criminal justice data and systematic survey designs allow the focus to be on specific features of gang member involvement in crime and delinquency (Curry & Decker, 1998). National statistics on the gang problem in our country has stemmed from a series of surveys conducted by different researchers since the 1970's. Data generated from surveys to law enforcement personnel have been a reliable measure of the size and scope of the national gang problem and it is only recently that our federal government has made strides to develop a national database in which gang statistics can be gathered and updated to assist in tracking and analyzing gang prevalence and patterns. Original efforts undertaken by Miller (1975) involved surveying twelve city law enforcement agencies and finding that six of these twelve large U.S. cities had reported gang

problems. Miller's pioneer research provided a limited snapshot of how much crime in America was described as gang related. These base measures paved the way for subsequent national surveys which utilized larger sample sizes through more consistent and reliable designs.

Since the development of the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) in 1995, annual data have been gathered from a larger representative sample of local law enforcement agencies across the U.S. to track the size and scope of the national gang problem. Examination of NYGS results over the last decade (2001 to 2009) have shown more than a 20 percent increase in the number of gangs and the number of jurisdictions reporting gang problems. The most recent survey from 2009 estimated a continued increase in the prevalence rate of gang activity from 32.4 percent in 2008 to 34.5 percent in 2009 (Egley and Howell, 2011). Current estimates yielded across 3,500 police departments reported that 28,100 gangs and 731,000 gang members were present within their respective jurisdictions. Some researchers believe these numbers to be underestimates of the real extent of gang prevalence in America based on the fact that the methodology entails asking survey respondents to report information only for youths or young adults within that jurisdiction that they would identify as a gang. As such, this criterion excludes information pertaining to motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs.

In 2005 and again in 2009, gang threat assessments were assembled by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Drug Intelligence Center, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. The methodology consisted of collecting and analyzing strategic gang-related intelligence available through federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies as well as data gathered from the National Drug Threat Survey in order to assess the level of threat that gangs pose within specified regions across the nation. Key findings from the current 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment indicate that there were approximately 1 million gang members belonging to more than 20,000 gangs who were criminally active within all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Moreover, it was reported that the migration of gangs into suburban and rural areas have heightened safety concerns for those communities that may previously have been unaffected by gang-related crime and violence. As awareness continues to increase and the use of data-driven intelligence becomes the focal point of law enforcement agencies, we can expect these numbers to continue to increase as more intelligence and data will be made available for tracking and analysis purposes.

North Carolina Gangs

In having investigated and researched the nature and scope of gangs and their impact on communities for over a decade, North Carolina has seen an increase in the

proliferation of gangs in the state. Trend analyses have shown consistent increases in the number of gangs identified as well as the total number of gang members across the state. It is important to point out that these increases can be attributed to law enforcement identifying previously unreported criminals.

The first state-level assessment was conducted by Oehme (1997) which not only depicted an extensive and detailed analysis of the gang problem but also established a statistical benchmark against which to measure later efforts. Through his technique of direct surveying of as many law enforcement agencies as possible, Oehme was able to institute a standard methodology for subsequent statewide assessments not only within NC but also across other U.S. states. All concurrent statewide assessments of the gang problem were undertaken by the North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center (NCCJAC), which is the state's designated statistical analysis center housed within the Governor's Crime Commission division of the NC Department of Public Safety. Initial research efforts of the NCCJAC, which started in 1999, were faced with general denial from law enforcement agencies on the presence of gangs in their respective jurisdictions. In 1999, law enforcement survey responses identified 322 gangs with 5,068 total members. In 2004, 387 gangs were identified with 8,517 members. What this five year comparative analysis reveals (more so than the apparent increase in numbers which may be largely due to initial denial, underreporting, or disparate definitions of what constitutes a gang or gang member) is the increased willingness by law enforcement agencies to acknowledge the presence of gangs and the problems associated with gang activities in these communities.

In an effort to gather additional information on the nature and extent of gang activity, the Commission's gang survey instrument was revised and administered again to law enforcement personnel in 2007, this time reporting 550 gangs having a total of 14,500 members. Due to limitations based on poor survey responses and definitional criteria for what constitutes a gang or gang member, researchers moved away from survey based investigations and instead used data from NC GangNet, a voluntary statewide web database, which has established strict criteria for entry and validation of gangs/gang members. Evaluation of these data also yielded increases in the number of gangs across participating jurisdictions from 2009 to the present time.

Without focusing on the actual numbers that each of these studies revealed, the point to highlight is that NC has made considerable strides in acknowledging and identifying gang issues and related problems affecting the state on various levels. In over a decade's time, we have seen a move towards proactive, data-driven suppression strategies; increased collaboration and partnerships between various local, state, federal agencies as well as community organizations to combat gangs through prevention and intervention strategies. Legislation has been enacted to codify the definition of a criminal gang as well as establishing new anti-gang laws

and sentencing enhancements. The use of standardized reporting systems has enabled efficient intelligence gathering and data sharing across jurisdictions and counties. Increased funding opportunities have been prioritized for community gang prevention and intervention programs with emphasis on sustainability, resource leveraging, strong data collection and program evaluation components which serve to enhance operations.

In order to foster continued efforts to combat rising gang problems within the state, the Governor issued Executive Order Number 69 in 2010, calling for the formation of a statewide Governor's Gang Task Force representative of various state departments, federal agencies, legislative and judiciary branches, law enforcement, education, and community grassroots leaders. The task force's primary duties will be to compile a statewide comprehensive gang reduction plan to better prevent, mitigate, and address gang activity.

Data for our analysis was obtained through a survey administered at the 2011 Gangs Across the Carolinas conference. The conference is presented by the NC Gang Investigator's Association which is comprised of law enforcement and criminal justice professionals dedicated to the prevention and suppression of gangs and gang-related activities within the state. While concurrent publications by these authors will focus on specific trends and patterns in gang prevalence, make-up, membership, and criminal involvement, this report will highlight on the significant relationships found between the level of experience an officer has in working with gang-involved populations and their perceptions of gang presence, the ideal age for starting gang prevention, and the capacity of intervention programming. The significance of these correlations confirm that addressing the gang problem in any community needs to be based on a holistic and comprehensive approach which affords equal importance on all three domains of prevention, intervention, and suppression.

When Spergel and Curry (1993) assessed the types of intervention strategies implemented across gang cities in the US, they documented that although suppression was the dominant response to gangs, it was seen as the least effective. Law enforcement respondents in that study perceived it as less effective than providing social opportunities such as those afforded through job training and education. The data in our survey also points to length of work being significantly correlated to intervention propensity. The more experience a law enforcement officer has with gang-prone populations, the more they should reasonably understand the futility of suppression and deterrence tactics when used alone to combat gangs. Other findings will point to perceived community support and ideal ages for gang prevention programming. This perceived ideal age concerns the effectiveness of current programming that tends to target junior high school aged youths.

Methodology

The purpose of the research was two-fold. First, the research served to inform the researchers about the perceptions of gang investigators within the state. Secondly, the research served to provide some insight into the effects of certain predictors upon the gang investigators' propensity to identify with intervention measures within the state. While understanding much of the frequency data was important, the correlational data was even more telling and important for the purposes of this piece.

The research was designed to be cross-sectional in nature. The research was designed to explore the characteristics of gang investigators in North Carolina and compare characteristics in order to identify relationships. The data collected was survey data of 204 gang investigators in the state of North Carolina. The researchers administered 450 surveys to registered members of a gang conference, receiving 204 in return. The return rate was slightly lower than the return at a 95% confidence interval, which would have necessitated a sample size of 207. Nonetheless, the sample size of 204 could be generalizable to the population of gang investigators within the state of North Carolina.

The survey consisted of 31 items, all of which were designed to gather the perceptions of the respondent regarding gang activity in the jurisdiction in which the respondent worked at that time. The 31 survey items represented 13 independent variables and 2 dependent variables. The independent variables in the research included community support, ideal age, job assistance, educational/vocational, sports-based programming, counseling, addiction services, creativity programs, life-skills training, juvenile mentoring, adult mentoring, length of work, and whether a distinct gang unit existed at their agency. The two dependent variables were gang perception in the jurisdiction and an intervention propensity score, which was a scale measure of the nine outreach or intervention programs.

The aforementioned independent variables were constructed of one item per variable, gauging the perception of the respondent on the topic area with the exception of the length of work and the gang unit presence. These two variables were demographic in nature. The first dependent variable, gang perception, gauged the perceived gang presence in the community or jurisdiction of the respondent. The second dependent variable, intervention propensity, used a scale measure of the nine intervention strategies to determine how prone the respondent would be to accept intervention strategies in their jurisdiction. Operationalization of the variables was not vital for the independent variables, simply due to the nature of the question, which was written to determine perception.

The second dependent variable, intervention propensity, was operationalized by using the nine aforementioned intervention strategies and the accompany perceptions in a scale measure. The nine intervention strategies were believed to be fairly comprehensive by the researchers and represented a true propensity based upon

the perception of the respondent. The scale item was subjected to reliability testing, yielding an alpha of 0.82. The reported alpha was representative of the included nine items with no items omitted and represented the highest alpha score amongst all testing.

The research questions employed concerned relationships with intervention propensity. The first research question was, "Is there a correlation between gang presence and intervention propensity?". The second research question reflects similarly ("Is there a correlation between community support and intervention propensity?"). Likewise, the third and fourth research questions also concern correlation with intervention propensity ("Is there a correlation between ideal age for prevention and intervention propensity?" and "Is there a correlation between length of work and intervention propensity?"). The final research question ("Is there a relationship between gang presence, community support, ideal age, gang-related crime level, and length of work and intervention propensity?") concerns intervention propensity controlling for other potential intervention variables.

Internal and external validity should be a concern in the aforementioned research. In terms of internal validity, the items do measure perception and are designed to do so. However, questions could be raised concerning the intervention propensity measure and how accurate the scale measure is in measuring intervention propensity. While the measure seems valid on its face, the weakness must be addressed. The construct was developed after thorough consideration of the varieties of intervention programming. Future work shall seek to improve this measure. Likewise, external validity should be considered as a weakness. While the sample reflects a generalizable sample within North Carolina, the ability to generalize the results to a national population is low. Future research will seek to obtain a more generalizable sample.

Reliability is also an area of concern in the research. The given items are certainly subject to interpretation by the respondent, especially when perceptions are the focus. While the researchers do not believe that this affected the responses, the potential inconsistency should, at very least, be addressed. The wording of the items was geared to a law enforcement audience, thus reducing the potential for inconsistency in responses or inaccurate interpretation of items. The consistency of the measures was ensured during coding and analysis. In addition, scale reliability was optimized by utilizing the nine-item intervention propensity measure.

Analysis

The initial portion of the analysis consisted of creating a frequency table for the acquired data (Table 1) and a correlation matrix for the given variables, which is displayed in Table 2. The frequency analysis revealed some interesting trends for consideration in future research and going forward in the area of gang prevention and intervention. Gang presence, as perceived by the respondent, tended to be high, with

the mean lying between “Moderate” and “High”. The level of community support tended to register lower than some may have anticipated, with a mean lying between “Low” and “Moderate”. The ideal age for the commencement of prevention and intervention programming seemed to be quite low, being 9.5 years of age. In fact, 89.3% of respondents felt that the ideal age was 12 and under, while 65.8% felt that the ideal age was 10 and under for prevention and intervention programming. Gang presence and community support were two variables that illuminated potential problems within communities, as well as the community relationship with law enforcement agencies. 76.9% of the respondents perceived that gang presence was moderate or high in their jurisdictions. On the other hand, 94.1% of respondents rated community support as moderate or below, while 56.4 % rated community support as “Low” or “None”.

Table 1. Frequency Data

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The correlation analysis revealed some significant relationships between predictor variables and intervention propensity, which was yielded by the sum of the perception of nine intervention strategies. Likewise, other relationships were observed. Gang presence was shown to be significant correlated with intervention propensity ($r = .313, p < .01$). One of the interesting aspects of this relationship was that the significant correlation was not observed amongst the individual strategies with the exception of adult mentoring ($r = .231, p < .01$). In addition, gang presence was observed to be significantly correlated with perceived community support ($r = .201, p < .01$), ideal age for the start of programming ($r = -.211, p < .01$), and whether the agency had a distinct gang unit ($r = .270, p = .000$). The results supported the hypothesis that gang presence and intervention propensity are significantly correlated, indicating a moderate correlation between the two variables.

The levels of perceived community support and ideal age were not observed to share a significant correlation with intervention propensity, thus failing to support the aforementioned hypotheses. However, community support was observed to be significantly related to two other variables. Community support was observed to be moderately correlated with gang presence ($r = .201, p < .01$) and presence of a distinct gang unit ($r = .232, p < .01$). Ideal age also shared a significant correlations with gang presence and a weak correlation with whether the agency had a distinct gang unit ($r = -.151, p < .05$).

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The length of work of the respondent was observed to be significantly related to intervention propensity ($r = .220, p < .01$), thus supporting the fourth hypothesis. The length of work was also observed to show a significant correlation with four of the listed intervention programs individually. The length of work was measured in total months of working with gang-prone juveniles. While the variable measured the work with juveniles, the relationship was believed to be instrumental. This would also explain why the observed significant relationships might be applicable to juveniles or both sets (juvenile and adult) gang-prone groups.

The final analysis consisted of a nonlinear regression analysis, using the predictor variables of gang presence, community support, ideal age, and perceived levels of gang-related crime (Table 3). The dependent variable was intervention propensity. The regression model was not observed to be significant. In addition, none of the model's coefficients were observed to be significant with the exception of length of work (Coeff. = .026, $p < .05$). Overall, the predictive nature of the aforementioned variables on intervention propensity was observed to be low. Length of work, however, seems to be a strong predictor of how a respondent may embrace intervention programming within the law enforcement profession.

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Discussion and Recommendations

The perceived gang presence in a jurisdiction appeared to do much to mold the perceptions of other areas of the respondent. Naturally, the level of perceived gang presence correlated with the presence of a distinct gang unit. This perception was also indicative of community support and ideal age. The importance of the relationship between gang presence and perceived community support should not be underestimated. The relationship indicates that both rise in concert, which could be

expected in many ways. As gang presence increases, community support will increase as the public feels the need for involvement. In addition, the increase in gang presence will also be indicative of a decrease in ideal age for the start of gang prevention or intervention programming. The decrease in the perceived ideal age would be a reaction to higher levels of gang presence, which would be a natural response.

Gang presence did share a significant relationship with intervention propensity, which was hypothesized. As the perceived gang presence increased, respondents were more prone to be accepting of intervention strategies, which is important when considering the sample utilized. The acceptance of prevention and intervention measures in the law enforcement community lacks in many circles and is vital to the reduction of gang-related crime and sheer gang presence in communities. There are other characteristics, however, that more closely define those more prone to intervention programming.

The length of work with juvenile offenders or youth prone to gang activity seemed to have a profound effect upon the intervention propensity of the respondent. The length of this type of work correlated moderately with intervention propensity. This relationship was also observed in a statistically significant coefficient when controlling for confounding variables. As the work length increases, so does the intervention propensity or acceptance of intervention programming.

The lack of significant relationships between community support, ideal age, and intervention propensity should not be viewed as fodder for the lack of significance of increasing community support or considering a reduction in the minimum age of prevention or intervention programming. While not significantly related or correlated, the observed lack of perceived community support should be a wake-up call for law enforcement agencies and communities alike. Likewise, the ideal age for the programming was reported to be at 9.5 years old on average, which is significantly less than what may be considered common for prevention programming in junior high schools.

One of the first considerations for recommendations should be a consideration of the importance of community support. The seeming lack of community support should be the focus of improvement in collaboration between law enforcement agencies and communities in terms of gang reduction. The levels of perceived community support were directly related to whether or not an agency had a distinct gang unit. Law enforcement officials should involve the community in order to make known the necessity for a distinct gang unit and the potential benefits that such a unit may present.

Additionally, recommendations could be made as relate to ideal age for commencing prevention and intervention programming. The response mean of 9.5 years of age should raise concern about current programming that targets junior high school-aged youth. While more research is needed to understand reasoning for reduced age or to understand specific details regarding programming, the reduced age indicates that a possible implementation prior to junior high school may be beneficial. In

addition, and while not gauged in the aforementioned research, evaluations of current programming, including longitudinal research spanning the entire crime-prone age distribution and beyond, is vital in order to consider the value of the programming and the necessity to implement the programming at an earlier stage.

Finally, the importance of experience and intervention propensity should not be discarded. The significance between length of work and intervention propensity signal that a move toward intervention strategies may be better realized with investigators who have more experience working with gang-prone youth. An agency seeking to make a move toward implementation of intervention programming as a means to supplant suppression may be better served by utilizing experience in this endeavor. The ultimate value of intervention programming must be realized, despite the type of programming. As observed in Table 2, perceptions of each individual intervention strategy were significantly correlated with the others ($p = .000$). This observation is indicative of the support for intervention programming across the board when perceptions of one programming type are high.

In closing, a movement toward comprehensive models of gang reduction has necessitated consideration of intervention programming and the effects of such programming upon offending rates over a long period of time. Future research must seek to evaluate programming longitudinally in order to determine how intervention programming may reduce future criminality and gang membership. In the near future, perceptions of gang investigators should be gauged on a national level to identify similarities and trends in other areas. Expansion of the current research should be employed in order to fortify the need for intervention programming and subsequent gang reduction.

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