

Gangs in the Village: Re-conceptualizing Gangs as a Social Work Phenomenon

by

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ABSTRACT

For decades gangs have been conceptualized primarily as a law enforcement phenomenon. However, empirical data on gang membership suggests that social work interventions may prove more effective in addressing gangs than law enforcement strategies. Using data from a comprehensive gang assessment of middle school and high school gang members in two rural locations in North Carolina, this study identified three social work-related dimensions of gang membership: family awareness, membership dynamics and membership stability. The study isolated and analyzed nine gang-related variables. The study found that the largest proportions of gang members joined the gang as a result of high-ordered needs such as the need for belonging and excitement. Additional finding suggest that the majority of gang members had parents who were unaware that their child was involved in gang-related activity at the time the child joined the gang. The data also suggest that a large majority of gang members would never consider leaving the gang. When examining the data on parental awareness, membership motives and the respondents' attitudes toward gang desistance, the findings support the re-conceptualization of gangs as a social work phenomenon. The field of Social Work could address the primary correlates of gang membership through mental health services, community based programs such as project BUILD, recreational programs and parenting skills programs.

“Introduction to the Problem”

The most recent national gang assessment (2009) indicated that there were more than one million gang members in the United States as of September 2008 (National Intelligence Center, 2009). The presence of gangs has historically correlated to a presence of crime. Some law enforcement agencies, in the latest national assessment, reported as much as 80% of their crime as gang-related (Ibid). Despite the fact that gang membership is one of the strongest predictors of individual violence in adolescence (Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano & Harachi, 1998), gang intervention strategies have not been overly successful.

Programs such as Scared Straight, Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), Operation Hammer and Operation Hardcore are a few examples of programs that have been ineffective at reducing gang violence (Cole, 2003; Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino & Buehler, 2003; Hansen & McNeal, 1997; Rosenbaum & Hanson, 1998). Other programs that have been pronounced 'effective' are not effective at addressing the root causes of gang membership but rather other tangentially-related gang topics.

Some effective long-term gang programs are considered effective because they produced results such as: more positive attitudes toward police, fewer positive attitudes about gangs, improvement in grades and school attendance, successful selective prosecution and more resistance to peer pressure (Howell, 2000). A juvenile who joined a gang to gain money for food can have a more positive attitude toward police and maintain his or her membership in the gang. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps the problem with these interventions is that they are based on law enforcement models. Law enforcement interventions tend to be based on one of two models: deterrence model or the public health model.

“The Deterrence and Public Health Models”

The deterrence model attempts to promote the secession of criminal behavior as the result of punishment or the threat of punishment. This perspective is developed from Deterrence Theory which argues that crime can be reduced if punishment is swift, certain and severe (Siegel, 2010). The underlying logic follows that if people perceive that their crimes will be detected and they will be subjected to severe punishment, only irrational people will continue to commit crime (Daniels, Baumhover, Formby, & Clark-Daniels, 1999). The deterrence model has two flaws.

First, gang membership resists deterrence-based interventions because gang membership is needs-based. The four commonly cited reasons for gang membership are the need for money, the need for protection, the need for belonging and the need for excitement. Even in cases of perfect deterrence, the satisfaction of the aforementioned needs will often outweigh the deterrence effect. Achieving perfect deterrence is not truly possible under the American system of jurisprudence. The certainty of punishment is often dependent on the type of attorney a defendant can afford to retain. The second problem associated with the deterrence model is the focus.

Deterrence models typically focus on crime. When examining gang membership, crime is only a symptom of unmet sociological needs. Law enforcement agencies are simply not tasked with or equipped to intervene in situations where social support is necessary to address the root causes of gang membership. When law enforcement agencies try to move beyond deterrence-based enforcement models they typically adopt the second type of law enforcement

intervention strategy: the public health model.

Public health models of intervention are based on mass education. The underlying assumption of the public health model is that educating people about risky or unsanitary behaviors will promote safer behavior. Interestingly, there is a long history of law enforcement involvement in public health oriented interventions. As far back as 1924, Chinese police were tasked with the responsibility of serving as trained sanitation and hygiene workers for John B. Grant's introduction of a healthcare system to China (Fee & Bu, 2007). This Chinese police model was based on the Japanese model of sanitation policing which was in-turn based on an even older German model (Fee & Bu, 2007). Public health models, however, do not translate well to crime. In summary, the data clearly indicates that the prevalence of gangs is correlated to a presence of crime. Therefore examining the phenomena from a different perspective, by utilizing a different model may shed new light on addressing gang membership.

The purpose of this research is to examine whether gangs should be re-conceptualized as a social work issue instead of a law enforcement issue. Social work as a multidimensional framework could provide a more holistic approach to determining effective intervention strategies for gang members. Simply educating juveniles about the dangers of gang membership will not necessarily change their behavior because juveniles often act according to bounded reality. Situations that place structural-level demands on individuals who cannot adapt, will often be met with decisions and behaviors that are rationally bounded (Jones, 1999). Juveniles will make decisions about gang membership that fit a bounded view of their lives, circumstances and options.

In order for the public health model to effectively address gang membership, juveniles would need to act according to perfect rationality. Reducing gang membership by focusing on the root causes may necessitate moving away from law enforcement intervention models simply because law enforcement models are not designed to directly address the root causes of gangs. The following section in this study will consist of relevant literature on intervention strategies in the field of social work which could reduce gang membership. A discussion of these strategies will provide further justification on the need to re-conceptualize gangs as a social work phenomenon because they identify several different gang- related needs.

“Toward a Social Work Model”

Social work is an extremely broad and diverse field that's main focus is “helping”. Helping to empower individuals, bring families together, and create more cohesive communities. Social work professionals are able to intervene with individuals, families, groups and communities at basic as well as systematic levels. Social workers can be found variety of places anywhere from hospitals, to

community based organizations, public agencies, private businesses, clinics, schools, nursing homes, private practices, police departments, courts and large corporations. Most importantly social workers are charged with the task of understanding why individuals behave the way they do and how they can work to effectively bring change to their clients situation.

As we mentioned earlier, the four commonly cited reasons for gang membership are the need for money, the need for protection, the need for belonging and the need for excitement. In examining each need we will look at social work interventions that currently exist to meet those needs as well as where social workers could possibly reorganize their interventions to provide services directly to gang members and youth at risk of gang membership. The first identified need to be address is the need for money or financial assistance.

“The Need for Money”

Some social work or human service organizations, such as The Department of Social Services (DSS), in North Carolina provide several services that directly address financial assistance to children and families that could be directed towards youth at risk of gang involvement. One way DSS provides financial assistance to youth and their families is through the Work First Cash Assistance Program. The Work First Cash Assistance Program was derived from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) governmental program and provides financial assistance in monthly checks to families that are at least 200% below the poverty level. TANF was created in 1996 as a way to help families become self sufficient through employment while providing temporary financial assistance.

The most positive aspects of the program than could directly affect youth is the assistance is monthly. There is no reason for gang members to join gangs in order to assist their families financially when the family is receiving a monthly check. However, some of the more negative aspects of this assistance is that it is limited to 60 months in the parent’s lifetime and in order to receive this assistance, the parents must prove they are seeking permanent employment and/or child support from the non-custodial parent, and the assistance is not provided directly to the youth therefore the youth does not have any knowledge of how the assistance directly impacts them. Another source of money for a gang involved youth could be through employment services.

Employment services and job training assists older gang involved youth with not only money, but also more independence. “...Training and job opportunities should be accessible to older gang youths who, for a variety of reasons such as maturation and pressures to raise a family, may be ready to leave the gang” (Spergel & Grossman, 1997). Unlike with Work First, this type of intervention, employment puts money directly in the hands of the gang involved youth. Additionally,

employment services often pair youth up with some type of support or coaching and include educational opportunities as well. Another positive aspect of this intervention is that it provides a positive, pro-social outlet for the youth and will assist him or her with physically separating him or herself away from the gang. Therefore employment services may serve a dual purpose of providing not only money, but some degree of protection to the gang member. Protection is second area of need identified.

“The Need for Protection”

Protection is a concept that can be expressed both directly (i.e. protective factors) as well as indirectly (protection focused agencies/services). Two examples of protection that have been proven to keep youth from becoming gang involved are: strong familial bonds and mental health of the youth. In his book, James Garbarino (1995) says that for most youth who live in areas where violence is ingrained in the very fabric of communities then it does not take much to perpetuate a feeling of fear and insecurity. Youth who join gangs often do because they feel that proximity to other gang members will provide them some sort of protection to their perceived threats. Garbarino tells parents to “monitor what children do watch and how they reflect what they watch in their clothing, their language, and the way they treat each other. Encourage positive media experiences, positive language, and positive peer relations” (Garbarino, 1995, p.87). He purports that parental involvement in the youth’s life as well as in the community could act as a protective factor against the real and perceive violence they face.

Mental Health services provide the model for the most successful interventions for behaviors often associated with gang involvement. The Department of Health and Human Services in North Carolina is pushing for Mental Health agencies to provide strength-based, person centered, “evidenced-based services” that have proven successes with individuals and families. Currently there are several practices that have shown positive results with youth involved in the juvenile justice system as well as substance abusing youth. Some of these services are Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST), Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT), Motivational Interviewing (MI), and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

Treatment modalities such as MST and MDFT focus on the family as a whole and how the family interacts with the community at large. The parents are taught parenting skills, communication skills, setting appropriate boundaries and advocating skills. While the youth receive treatment around reducing or eliminating the symptoms related to their mental disorder as well as receiving skills that are focused on changing negative behaviors. The family is taught to navigate the school system, legal system, and access community resources. Both modalities will often bring in the identified client’s more positive social support system and work with

them to be a change agent for the client.

MI and CBT are usually administered in individual as well as intensive in-home and group therapy. The main focus of MI is to assist people with enhancing their own motivation to change behaviors. Change happens in incremental ways with the client guiding the change. In the same way, CBT's focus is to change behaviors by becoming more cognizant of what consequences those behaviors have. Other services currently provided by Mental Health providers in North Carolina are targeted case management, therapeutic day treatment, and out of home placement. Case management is a very limited service where the case manager is able to coordinate, link to and monitor services for the client. Day treatment is a skill-building therapeutic program that is strength-based and addresses the identified needs of the youth.

The main limitation for mental health services are based on diagnostic criteria as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (DSM-IV-TR) and often youth appear to be misdiagnosed or over-diagnosed in order to fit the criteria for services. In addition, "gang-involvement" is not specifically listed as a criterion for mental health services or as symptom of any mental disorder. Therefore, if the youth is involved with a gang, but has no other mental health symptoms, then they will not qualify for services.

On the other side of DSS there are services for children who are or at-risk of being abused or neglected. Child Protective Services (CPS) is best known for removing children from dangerous or neglectful home environments, however there are some services they provide families that are underutilized and positive. CPS is able to provide case management to identified families focusing on teaching the families parenting skills, setting appropriate boundaries and communication. They also assist parents with accessing community resources such as employment, education, financial assistance, food, transportation etc. However, the problem with DSS lies with the stigma of receiving these types of services. Social workers that work for DSS are often considered "baby snatchers" and are not trusted by the community. This makes it harder for youth to trust that their need to belong will be fulfilled. Belonging is the third area of need identified.

"The Need for Belonging"

Community programs are often grant-funded or privately funded services provided directly to specific groups of people or communities. These programs are able to reach a broader spectrum than mental health or even social services because they are not based on diagnoses and may not have as strict guidelines around income limits. Community programs can be designed around the needs of those in the community such as providing services such as: tutoring, recreation, skill-building, independent living skills, job training, clothing and food assistance, etc. For instance,

there is a program currently in existence in Durham, North Carolina that is called Project BUILD that assists youth who involved with gangs, or at risk of gang involvement. This program, amongst other things, provides mentors for the youth and exposes them to activities and experience both in and outside of their current community. Another program, Youth Employed and Succeeding (YES), uses Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding to focus on providing educational services (GED) and job skills and placement for the youth whose families are receiving food stamps. Other supportive groups that could establish a place of belonging for gang members or at-risk gang members are churches, community based groups, sports leagues and mentoring programs.

Community programs can be seen as filling gaps left by social services and mental health, but they are limited only by their funding sources. They constantly need to seek new grants or endowments in order to continue to provide services. In addition, they also have admission criterion that can limit their reach into the community. Even with these social work interventions there continue to be gaps in service implementation. Most of the interventions mentioned are reactive instead of preventative. In addition, there is no one type of intervention that can meet all of the needs of gang involved youth and their families. Especially when one of those needs involves seeking excitement. Excitement is the fourth and last area of need identified.

“The Need for Excitement”

There are several different opportunities for thrill seeking juveniles to take advantage of in their community. Such examples include: summer camps, recreation centers or other community based organizations or schools that offer sports leagues and activities or trips incorporating the arts and science. It is important that community based programs or agencies acknowledge that juveniles need excitement and incorporate this essential need into their programs. In addition, communities will have to offer additional free, creative and age appropriate recreational opportunities to youth to reduce or eliminate “boredom”. However, these programs often struggle with limited availability in communities because of the cost that are associated with creating the programs and funding issues.

In developing successful social work interventions, community outreach focused on education and connection to appropriate resources for families who are at risk will be crucial. Increased family involvement will assist youth to feel more connected and protected. Increased educational opportunities and employment resources will assist the youth and their families with any financial difficulties they might be facing. An examination of social work-related dimensions of gang membership yields a need to further identify whether social work interventions may prove more effective in addressing gangs than law enforcement strategies. The next

section aims to provide empirical data to support this assertion.

“Study Methodology”

This study is an explanatory analysis of gang membership in two rural jurisdictions in North Carolina. The study used a concurrent mixed method model (Creswell, 2009) to explore the membership dynamics that may be amenable to social work intervention. The study was a cross-sectional design using data collected by the North Carolina Community in Schools agency in 2010. The comprehensive gang assessment was conducted in two rural locations in the Piedmont area of North Carolina: Chiappa County and Piralldi County (Pseudonyms).

The survey participants were students in both middle school and high school. This study identified one gang related question and 8 gang-related probes which focused on various dimensions of gang membership: family dynamic, membership dynamics and membership stability were used as the exploratory context. Other scholars (Maxson, Whitlock & Klein, 1999) have found that using multiple dimensions to study gangs more beneficial than one-dimensional measures. This study selected both qualitative and quantitative variables in order to create a more thorough understanding of the gang membership dynamic in the two rural counties.

In addition to the membership-related study variables, the study also examined respondent's age, respondent's age at gang membership, respondent's sex, respondent's grade and respondent's grade point average as demographic variables. The gang-specific probes addressed the four primary motives for joining a gang: the need for money, the need for protection, the need for excitement and the need for belonging. Additional questions concerning family dynamics were also analyzed to better understand the family context in which the respondents lived.

“Demographic Context”

The demographic analysis revealed that the respondents from the two counties were fairly similar. The mean age for the students in both counties was 14 years old ($n= 3,125$). The data indicate that the distribution was not skewed ($Sd = 2.04$) despite the slightly higher median age ($md= 15$). The students in this sample reported strong grade point averages (. I should be noted that the lack of skew and relative homogeneity within this variable is most probably due to reporting bias. Less than half ($n= 1,487$) of the sample reported their GPA when asked. The mean age at gang membership was just 10 years old ($n= 212$). This variable was not skewed but did have a larger degree of heterogeneity in the distribution ($Sd = 4.34$) (See Table-1). In order to develop a more complete context in which to analyze these finding, two demographic variables were also analyzed.

Tables 1 and 2 not printed here - - - requires subscription

Table-2 shows that the sample was distributed evenly across sex. Females constituted the larger of the two parts with 50.4% (n= 1,578). These students were also evenly divided between their respective grades. The smallest group represented were the 12 graders (11.2%, n= 341). The group with the largest representation was the 8th and 9th graders with 16.7% (n= 506) and 16.1% (n= 490) respectively. An obvious omission to this demographic analysis was a variable measuring the respondents' ethnicity. The data were found to be flawed in that the respondents disproportionately reported being in the 'Other' classification. The reported ethnic make-up of the sample was highly skewed when compared to the U.S. Census data for these two counties. Ultimately, a research decision was made not to include the flawed ethnicity data (See Table-2).

Table-3 displays the findings from the gang-related probes. The data suggests that there was a relatively small number of juveniles who had formally joined gangs (8.3%, n= 238). While there is no commonly accepted amount of gang membership that is considered problematic, these data suggest that gangs have a clear presence in this jurisdiction. The fact that the gang representation in Chiappa County was lower than Piralldi County is unremarkable due to Chiappa County having a smaller population. The first two gang-related probes examined the family dynamic of gang membership.

When gang members were asked if their parents had been aware when they joined the gang, the majority of the respondents (62.3%, n= 154) replied that their parents did not know they had joined a gang. Additionally, the gang members were asked if other family members knew they had joined a gang. Interestingly, a larger number of respondents (66.8%, n= 165) stated that they had other family members who did know that they had joined a gang. These numbers were slightly higher in Chiappa County than in Piralldi County. These data seem to suggest that while the parents may have been involved in the lives of their children, they were not aware of the specific gang-related activities of their children. The next five variables used in the analysis focused on gang membership motives.

The gang members were asked if they joined the gang for protection, money, belonging or excitement. These four reasons are commonly found in the literature of gang membership. One limitation to asking a question in this format is that the motives for joining a gang are often complex. It is difficult to determine if the reasons are mutually exclusive or cumulative. This study can only report the statistic for of the respondents as they relate to mutually exclusive membership motive. Determining cumulative membership motives is outside the scope of this analysis.

While all of the four primary motives for gang membership are all considered needs, two of the motives are lower-ordered needs (protection and money) and two are higher-ordered needs (belonging and excitement). There were fewer gang members who reported joining the gang for lower-ordered need. Gang members reported that 36.8% (n= 91) joined because they needed money and only 35.9% (n= 89) reported joining for protection. The statistics begin to increase only when the analysis turns to the higher ordered needs such as the need for belonging and the need for excitement.

Gang members reported that 47.0% (n=116) joined the gang for a sense of belonging. This statistic is dwarfed by the finding that 68.3% (n=168) of the gang members in this study joined the gang for excitement. When disaggregating the data and examining Chiappa County separately, the data show that 72.6% of their gang members joined the gang for excitement.

These membership data suggest that among these rural students, gang membership was less an issue of survival or safety and more an issue of social praxis. It is important to note that 62.4% (n= 151) of the respondents also stated that they joined the gang for other reasons (See table-3).

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The final gang-related probe in the study asked the gang members if they would ever consider leaving the gang. Of the gang members who responded, 66.0% (n=155) said they would never consider leaving the gang. When examining the findings from Chiappa County alone the statistic increased to 69.4% (n=50) of gang member that would never consider leaving the gang. These data suggest that gang membership in these two counties may have a stable foundation for growth. If these gang members grow and do not transition out of the gang culture, they will inevitably rear their children in the same gang culture. This type of gang institutionalization has produced

generational gangs in larger urban areas such as Los Angeles, Chicago and Detroit. This study also utilized a bivariate analysis to explore the data.

“Bivariate Analysis”

A Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation (Pearson’s r) was computed to determine if there were any bivariate relationships present in the data. The bivariate analysis examined relationships between the respondents’ ages, respondents’ grade point averages, ages at which the respondents’ joined the gang and gang membership. There was one slight limitation to the bivariate model. The variable ‘gang membership’ was coded as a binary variable in order to conform to the model assumption of Pearson’s r matrix. Using the gang member variable in this way produced a point biserial correlation which tends to be attenuated due to the dichotomization of one variable. This attenuation did not negatively impact the statistical significance of the correlation only the correlation strength.

Table-4 displays the finding of the bivariate correlation matrix. This matrix shows that there was only one statistically significant relationships found in these data. Gang membership was significantly correlated with age ($r = -.145$, $p = .041$). This inverse correlation was weak but suggests that gang members in the sample tended to be younger. This statistic is supported by the univariate finding that the mean age at membership was 10 years old (See table-4). Using these data, the study examined intervention through the spectrum of social work.

“Discussion and Conclusions”

The findings from this assessment present a different picture of gang membership. The traditional image of the 18 year old gang member has given way to the reality of the 10 year old gang member. The traditional story of juveniles become gang members out of sheer desperation for money has been replaced with the reality of juveniles joining to fend off boredom. These evolved patterns of gang membership require an evolution in gang intervention as well. This study has shown how social work is aptly positioned to address the root causes of gang membership. There are several issues that need to be considered in order to move forward with a Social Work intervention for gangs.

The first question is whether or not a social work intervention would benefit juveniles in both urban and rural locations. Due to the geographic specificity, it is conceivable that a social work-based intervention may only be effective in certain types of locations. Rural locations may be more difficult to affect gang interventions due to sparse resources. Conversely, urban jurisdictions may simply have too many cases requiring social work intervention. In both situations, it is not known how the new social work-based gang intervention model will impact the other services already being provided by social service agencies. A larger question of program goals and outcomes must also be considered.

If a social work-based model were tested and shown to be effective, what would be the intended goal? Crime reduction has long been a stated goal of law enforcement intervention models but our understanding of the relationship between gangs and crime is that crime is merely a symptom of the deeper sociological problems that lead to gangs. Adopting crime reduction as the goal of social work-related interventions would be replicating the same problems seen in law enforcement models and assumes that most all crime is gang related. Perhaps a better goal for the social work-based gang intervention would be either fewer numbers of gang member or shorter tenures within gangs.

Social service agencies could highlight the preventative functions of the social work-based intervention by using 'fewer gang members' as the *a priori* goal for their intervention strategies. Additionally, by focusing on gang desistance social workers could substantially reduce the tenure of individuals in the gangs. Perhaps a bifurcated goal combining both outcomes would be possible. The realization of either of these two goals would create less gang stability within a jurisdiction and that may lead to lower representation of gangs.

This study has taken the first step toward a new intervention paradigm for gangs. The next step is to systematically test these concepts outlined in this text. The social work-based interventional model encompasses more community resources to systematically address the underlying causes of gangs. This approach to gang intervention views gangs as a problem for all members of the community not just the gang victims or the law enforcement personnel who attempt to control them but the whole village. If it is true, that it takes a village to raise a child; what must be done when there are gangs in the village?

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