

## **Gang Membership and Gender: Does Being a Female Gang Member Affect the Type, Frequency and Intensity of Crimes Committed?**

by

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### ***Abstract***

*This study investigated links between gang membership and Gender – more specifically it examined the relationship between gender and the type, frequency, and severity of the crimes committed by gang members. It compared male and female young adults' self reported gang affiliation and criminal activities. The objective was to explore whether gender has any effect on the type, frequency, and severity of the crimes committed by self proclaimed gang members. The results indicate that gender may have some initial inhibiting effect on the type, frequency, and severity of crime. However, as the members become “seasoned” this inhibition disappears and the differences in crime involvement by gender become inconsequential – indicating that being a male or female may affect initial criminal activities but as members progress into gangs and become more experienced, this difference begins to disappear and becomes almost negligible. The results also reveal that the perception that female role in gangs is minimal and limited to being “look outs” or providing sexual favors to the male members may not be as accurate as purported by earlier research. Rather as members mature into gangs, the differences by gender begin to disappear and males and females engage in equally serious crimes. The results of this research indicate that gang membership non-discriminatively affects both males and females. The implications of these findings for research and policy are discussed.*

### **Introduction:**

Understanding links between gang membership and crime has been the subject of social science research for quite some time. However, much of the research in this area (gangs) has focused on understanding male participation in gangs and their criminal behavior. Very little, if any, attention has been devoted to understanding the development of similar behavior among females. Consequently, females who have joined gangs have entered gang enterprise that is customized to

cater to the needs and demands of males.

This study investigates the links between gang membership and gender – more specifically it examines the relationship between gender and the type, frequency, and severity of crimes committed by gang members. It compares male and female young adults' self reported gang affiliation and involvement in criminal activities. The objective was to explore whether gender has any effect on the type, frequency, and severity of the crimes committed by self proclaimed gang members.

### **Literature Review:**

#### **Gangs and Delinquency Crime**

Gang membership in the United States was conservatively estimated at 1 million members as of September 2008, based on the analysis of federal, state, and local law enforcement reporting--an increase from an estimated 800,000 members in 2005. Current estimates include approximately 900,000 gang members residing within local communities across the country and more than 147,000 documented gang members incarcerated in federal, state, and local correctional facilities, according to state and federal corrections data (Department of Justice, 2010).

Since gangs pose serious threats to public safety and social fabric, society has had a longstanding interest in understanding gangs and their behavior. Literature on the relationship between gang membership and delinquency suggests that gang membership increases the frequency and severity of delinquent acts among youth. A substantial amount of research studies indicate that gang members commit serious and violent offenses at a rate several times higher than non-gang members (Kakar, 2008). Some research on gangs has focused on relationship between gangs and delinquency (Huff, 1990; Miller, 1990; Spergel, 1990; Kakar, 2002), ecological approach to gangs and delinquency (Shaw and McKay, 1942), gang involvement and drugs and delinquency (Fagan, 1989; 1990, Sirpal, 1997), and gangs as delinquent groups (Hagedorn, 1988; Klein, 1971; and Miller, 1975). There have been many studies (Thrasher, 1927; Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1989, 1990; Rhodes and Fischer, 1993; Vigil, 1988; Spergel, 1990; Thornberry et al., 1993; Sirpal, 2002; Kakar, 2006) that have examined the relationship between gang membership and delinquency by comparing gang and non-gang members. Most of these studies have reported that, in general gang members are more involved in delinquency and commit more serious delinquent acts and gang members are far more involved in delinquency, especially serious and violent delinquency (Esbensen, 2000; Battin-Pearson et al., 1998). Increased gang violence and gang sophistication have been found to be associated with expanded involvement in drug trafficking (Quinn and Downs, 1993). The proliferation of youth gangs in recent years has fueled public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs (Starbuck, Howell, and 2001). Drugs and violent crime are often believed to be closely associated with gangs (Klein, 1995).

Accordingly a great deal of research has been conducted on gangs to understand the relationship between gang membership and criminal activities (Thrasher 1927; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Esbensen and Winfree 1998; Kakar, 2008; Hughes 2005; Thornberry et al. 2003). Research results of several of these studies reveal that gang activities are associated with a variety of serious criminal activities including organized crime, drugs related crimes, and violent crime (Hagedorn 1998; Peterson et al. 2004, Thornberry 1995). More contemporary research has clearly established that there is a strong association between membership in a gang and violent crime (Katz et al. 2005; Peterson et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 2007; Hunt and Joe-Laidler 2001; Miller 1998, 2001; Miller and Decker 2001; Peterson et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 2007).

Thrasher et al. (1993) reported that when they compared the delinquent activities of gang members before and after joining the gangs, delinquency rates were significantly higher after joining the gangs than before joining the gangs. They also reported that gang members, when compared with non-gang members, did not have higher rates of delinquency before joining a gang. Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) reported that in their research they found that compared to non-gang members, gang members were twice more likely to carry a gun and commit more severe delinquency acts and three times more likely to commit drug offenses.

In addition to gang membership, other significant variables that seem to affect delinquency rates are: prior delinquency, delinquent friends and family criminality. Several studies (Thornberry et al., 1994; Elliott et al., 1985; and Elliott and Menard, 1996, and Johnson, 1979) reported that prior delinquency, delinquent friends, and family criminality (Kakar, 2005) were some of the strongest correlates of delinquent behavior. Other researchers argue that youth gangs and their activities are grounded in community disorganization and/or the dysfunction of the family unit.

Miller (1982) compared the crimes committed by non-gang youth groups and gangs. He called non-gang youth “law violating youth groups” and defined these groups as three or more youths whose members repeatedly committed crimes with support and cooperation from their friends. He reported that while youth groups had committed a large number of serious crimes such as larceny, burglary, drug and alcohol violations, assault, vandalism, and arson, gangs were involved at a higher rate in more violent offenses such as rape, assault, robbery, and weapon violations. Battin et al. (1998) investigated the contribution of gang membership to delinquency above and beyond having delinquent peers. They reported that gang members were found to have committed a higher rate of delinquent crimes as compared to non-gang members with or without delinquent friends. They also found that gang membership was found to independently predict both self-reported and officially recorded delinquency beyond the effects of delinquent friends and prior delinquency.

### **Gender and Crime**

In the existent literature on crime, gender has been considered a significant explanatory variable – generally males committing crimes at a steadily higher rate and more serious crimes. However, the current data demonstrates change in this established pattern and belief. In 1995, girls accounted for about one fourth of juvenile arrests—25.5% of those younger than 18 were female arrests (Maguire & Pastore, 1997). In 1997, female arrests climbed to 31% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). In 1998, girls accounted for 22% of juvenile arrests for aggravated assault and 31% of juvenile arrests for simple assault. Female arrests for weapon violations nearly tripled between 1981 and 1997. During the same period, the larceny rate for girls grew by 40%, whereas the male rate stayed constant (Widom, 2000). There has been a general perception that intervention or prevention of female delinquent or criminal behavior was unnecessary because only small numbers of females were involved and because such offenses were primarily sexual in nature, female offenders were the exception and their criminality was assumed to be a manifestation of an extreme form of psychological deviance.

Earlier research maintained, and to an extent it is true, that overall females pose a smaller problem than males (Kakar, 2008) and they commit far fewer and far less serious crimes than males. Recent changes, however, are apparent, as society has taken note of the fact that girls' arrests, in spite of constituting only about one fourth of all juvenile arrests, have increased at an alarming rate (Kakar, 2002). More girls are entering the juvenile justice system at younger ages, girls are committing more violent crimes such as assault, and some girls are involved in gangs previously thought to be male turf (Peters, 1998). Although female offenders have been called "the forgotten few" (Bergsmann, 1989), they are fast becoming too numerous—and their problems too serious—to ignore (cited by OJJDP, October, 1998) and forget.

### **Gender and Gangs**

The results of research on female crime in general have not escaped gang research. Until recently majority of the existent empirical research assumed that gang activities were virtually male domain and females did not take part in such behavior and if they did their roles were trivial and inconsequential. Hence much of the research in this area focused on understanding male gang membership, causes of gang behavior among males and other related gang activities among males (Esbensen et al. 1999; Fleisher 1998; Miller 1998, 2001; Miller and Brunson 2000; Miller and Decker 2001; Kakar, 2008; Kakar, 2005; Kakar, 2002; Moore and Hagedorn 2001). Very little, if any, attention has focused on understanding the development of similar behavior in females and their roles in gang structure and crime commission. Consequently bulk of the early research focused on male gang behavior and female gang members escaped any scrutiny. Thus, females who joined the criminal enterprise - entered a criminal enterprise that has been known to be

established by and for males (Kakar, 2008).

### **Change in the Gangs Composition, Structure, and Gang Members' Roles**

Until recently, females' gang membership has not been considered a serious problem because female gang members usually have committed only minor offenses and historically have constituted a very small proportion of gangs. It is believed, and to an extent it is a fact, that overall females pose a smaller problem than male gang members. They commit far fewer crimes than males. Females' involvement in general variety of crime including gang related crime has not been considered a serious problem because typically females have been involved in gangs at a significantly lower rate as compared to males and even when they have been involved they have committed only minor offenses and generally have maintained the roles auxiliary to male gang members. According to (Thrasher, 1927) females historically have constituted a very small proportion of the gang membership and their role has been ancillary. However, even some of the earlier research also recognized the fact that female gang members played an important role in youth gangs. For example, Brown (1977) reported that black female gang members played a central part of the gang's group identity. More recently, contemporary researchers have begun to examine the presence of females in gangs and have started looking at the female contribution in actual criminal activities involving gangs. Thus, recent research has examined whether female gangs were "real" gangs or mere imitation of male gangs. Some of these studies have concluded that in these early studies, "girls were defined solely in terms of their . . . relations to male gang members" (Campbell, 1990, p. 166).

However, more recent research on gangs and gender indicates that despite the earlier claim that 'female gang members' role in gangs is marginalized and largely relegated to secondary and supportive roles in mixed sex gangs' (Fleisher 1998; Turley 2003), their roles and activities are changing. Other research results (Anderson et al. 2003) purport that females' roles in gangs are becoming more and more like male gang members' roles. Consequently, it is hypothesized that female gang members are much more involved in committing criminal (including violent) acts than previously claimed.

Presently, examination of female gang members' roles in gang related criminal activities has become a main issue in criminal justice research. However it is still believed that although females play a significant, much more than "ancillary" role as purported by earlier research, yet their contributory roles in crime commission are still limited (Fleisher 1998; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Miller 1998, 2001; Thornberry et al. 2003; Kakar, 2008; Kakar, 2005; Kakar, 2002). Some current research has suggested that young women's roles are limited to providing "sexual favors" to their own gang members (Campbell 1990; Fleisher 1998; Miller 1998).

Indisputably current literature emphasizes that gang membership, for both males and females is a risky enterprise and is associated with increased risks of crime, especially violent crime and victimization (Taylor 2008). Review of the current literature suggests that females are joining gangs at a higher rate than males and their roles are becoming more significant. The results of several current studies (Taylor et al. 2007; Taylor, 2008) affirm that while male gang members typically have higher rates, female rates and experiences are not insignificant. Female gang members may face similar outcomes as males but for different reasons. For female gang members, the risks arise from both retaliatory behaviors associated with being in a gang and sexual and physical victimization from fellow male gang members (Fleisher 1998; Hunt and Joe-Laidler 2001; Miller 1998, 2001).

### **Justification for the Current Study**

Thus from existent research, it can be inferred that the composition of gangs is changing. This change in the composition of gangs by design suggests that members' roles are also changing and females' position in the gang structure is becoming more significant in crime commission than previously established. Consequently, in order to develop effective strategies to control and prevent serious gang related criminal activities, it is crucial that we understand the nature and extent of female involvement in gang activities. While the scholars have examined the contribution of male gang membership to delinquency and crime in general, drug related crime, violent crime and related activities, the contiguous effects of gender and the role played by female gang membership have not been fully examined.

As discussed earlier, a great deal of existent research has also examined the relationship between gang membership, drug use, family criminality, and criminal behavior. This research has generated a vast amount of studies purporting that gang membership is either precursor or sequel of criminal behavior. Similarly, a great deal of research on gangs demonstrates that gang membership or even a mere association with gangs increases the probability of criminal behavior. However, as discussed above, not much is known about how gender affects the relationship between gang membership and criminal, especially violent behavior, specifically for females. The present study examines the relationship between gender, gang membership and type, frequency, and severity of criminal behavior. Specifically, this paper focuses on whether self-reported gang membership is uniquely related to serious crime for females as compared to males. This study also examines how female involvement changes overtime in terms of type, frequency, and severity of criminal activities.

### **Methods**

To examine whether gender had any significant effects on gang criminal activities, this research compared the perceptions of two groups of young adults: female young adults' self reported gang affiliation and involvement in criminal

activities with male young adults' self reported gang affiliation and involvement in criminal activities.

The specific objective is to explore whether gender has any effect on the type, frequency, and severity of the crimes committed by self proclaimed gang members. To examine these effects, this research compared the perceptions of two groups of young adults right after they joined gangs and a year later. The perceptions of these two groups were compared to examine whether there were any significant differences.

It is possible that gender has an effect on the desire to join a gang, aspire to hold significant place and/or title in the gang structure and the type of criminal activities young gang members may engage in. Gender may also have an effect on how vulnerable young adults are, what their motives may be for joining a gang, and how the other seasoned gang members may entice and encourage a large proportion of already disfranchised young adults to join gangs and engage in certain types of activities. It will not be implausible to assume that gender has at least some effect on the frequency and type of criminal activities gang members will engage in. Thus, understanding the role of gender and young adults' perceptions about the role of gender is particularly important to devise prevention and control strategies.

### **Sample Description and Characteristics**

Data were collected from college students in an urban university located in the Southeast region of the United States. The respondents were students at three levels (Sophomore, Junior, and Senior) from various majors (Criminal Justice, Business, Psychology, Biology, Sociology, and undecided). Self-report surveys were used to gather data.

Data on both groups (male respondents who had gang affiliation and female respondents who had gang affiliation) were gathered from students who were from the same levels and had same majors. The only difference was their gender. All the students who opted to respond to the surveys were given credit for one of the class assignments. Those who chose not to participate were given an option of completing the class assignment and get credit without any negative consequences. All the students were required to finish the survey during the assigned class period and return it to the professor who then delivered these surveys to the researcher. Out of 400 surveys 201 completed and usable surveys were returned. These surveys were divided into two groups: (1) male respondents with some form of affiliation with gang or gang members and (2) female respondents with some form of affiliation with gang or gang members. There were 120 male respondents who reported having affiliation with gang or a gang member and having delinquent friends, and there were 81 female respondents reported having affiliation with gang or a gang member and having delinquent friends. These data are presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

Both groups included 201 young adults who stated that at some point in their high school career, they had some affiliation with a gang. They also reported having delinquent friends and all of them claimed knowing at least one person who had been a gang member. They also reported that they had known someone who was either in prison at present or had been in prison during the last five years. These respondents were between the ages of 20 and 23 with the mean age of 21.5. Approximately 26% of them identified themselves as African Americans, 55% as Hispanic, 17% as European-Americans and 2% as other. They all reported their family income below \$29,000 a year. A majority, (60%) of these respondents were male and 40% were female. Majority of the respondents reported having left gangs before they got in any trouble. Several of these respondents (49%) reported in the past five years they had friends who had some criminal history.

### **Measures**

The variables used in this study included gender, gang affiliation, knowledge of gang and/or gang member, knowledge of a friend/family member's criminal background and/or prison record, length of association with a gang or gang member.

*Gender* was determined using the information gathered from all respondents

They were divided into two groups: (1) male young adults with some form of affiliation with gang or gang members, (2) female young adults with some affiliation with gang or gang members.

Both groups included respondents who indicated that they had some form of affiliation with a gang during their high school career and knew a member of a gang in the past year and identified the gang by name. These respondents also reported having at least one of their friends involved in criminal activity and having at least one of the friends/family members currently in prison or had been in prison during the last five years.

*Gang affiliation* was determined by asking the question, "Did you ever belong to a gang?" Follow up questions were asked about the gang's name, structure, and characteristics. "Did you ever have any friends who were gang members? Although gang membership was a certain indicator of having gang affiliation, yet they were asked this question. Self report survey to determine gang membership is a method accepted by gang researchers (Klein, 1995; Kakar, 2006; Kakar, 2008).

*Length of Association with Gang or Gang Member* was determined by asking the questions, "How long have you had any association with gang? Did you ever belong to a gang?" Follow up questions were asked about when ( at what age and in what grade) the respondent actually joined a gang.

Data on *criminal friends* was gathered by asking the respondents to think of their four best friends. A series of questions were asked about each of these four friends. Two of the main questions were asked to determine whether any of the friends were criminal included: (1) In the past two years, has this friend of yours ever been arrested? (2) In the past two years has this friend done something that could get him/her in trouble with the police? (3) In the past two years has this friend engaged in some criminal activity such as stealing, drugs, vandalism etc.?

*Prior criminal history* was determined using self-report data from the respondents. A general index was constructed by using a sum of 12 self-reported measures indicating the frequency with which the respondent committed various offenses. The list of violent offense index included offenses such as hit friends, hit siblings, hit parents, used force to get some things, picked a fight, shoved, pushed, or threw things at others with an intent of hurting someone. Nonviolent offenses included acts such as stealing something worth more than \$50, stealing something worth more than \$5 but less than \$50, breaking into a house, destroying property, selling or doing drugs. Outcome Measures were divided into three general categories: (1) frequency of criminal activity, (2) type of criminal activity, and (3) severity of criminal activities.

Data were collected on all measures for two times – **Time 1** and **Time 2**.

**Time 1** was defined as having an association with gang or gang member for one to six months. **Time 2** was defined as an association with gang or gang member for more than six months.

### **Analysis and Results**

T-tests were used to compare the type, frequency, and severity of criminal activities for both groups on each of the measures two times:

**Time 1** compared type, frequency and severity of criminal activities of both groups for the first six months and **Time 2** compared type, frequency and severity of criminal activities of both groups after the first six months of having gang affiliation.

Time 1 results show that in the first six months males and females have significant differences with females assuming subservient roles and serving as

lookouts rather than actively engaging in any kind of dangerous or violent activities. During these months female gang members endeavored to gain knowledge of the gang structure. Time 2 analysis shows that although there were still differences in the means for type, frequency, and severity of criminal activities between males and females these differences were not statistically significant. For example, Time 1 mean differences between male and female criminal activities was 5.83 meaning males committing 5.83 more activities than females in the first six months and this difference became 1.15 in Time 2.

To determine the significance of these differences Analysis of Variance was conducted. The results indicate significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between males and females for Time 1. Male members with gang affiliation committed more crimes, more frequently, and more serious and violent crimes as compared to females in the first six months of their association with gangs. In general, the results demonstrate that gender may have some initial inhibiting effect on the type, frequency, and severity of crime. However, as the members become “seasoned” and more experienced, this inhibition disappears and the differences in crime involvement by gender become inconsequential – indicating that being a male or female may affect initial criminal activities but as members progress into gangs and become more experienced, this difference begins to disappear and becomes almost negligible. The results also reveal that the perception that female role in gangs is minimal and limited to being “look outs” or providing sexual favors to the male members may not be as accurate as purported by earlier research. In the beginning, female members may assume these traditionally expected roles, however, as members mature into gangs and become more experienced, the differences by gender begin to disappear and males and females engage in similar activities and equally serious crimes. In general males are at a disproportionately higher in number in gangs so they are more often involved in gang activities (same is true about the proportion of male involvement in crime in general). The results of this research indicate that gang membership non-discriminatively affects both males and females.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has some limitations, and the two most substantial limitations are about the sample. First, sample is small. A larger sample is needed to conduct further analyses. This limitation negatively affects the ability to generalize the ability of the research. Future research should collect data from larger samples. Such a study is planned. The second limitation is that while the sample of this study included two groups – males and females, the process of sampling was not random. This limitation negatively affects the representative ness of the sample. In addition, this method is less accurate than random sampling or stratified sampling strategies because sampling errors occur. However, despite these limitations, the study presents some very significant results.

#### Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

This study examined the effects of gender on the type, frequency, and severity of the crimes committed by self proclaimed gang members. The preliminary analysis of these data indicate that gender and gang affiliation have some effect only in the early stages. Later as members mature, they become more acclimatized to gang structure and hierarchy, they start becoming ambitious, vying for higher positions within the gang and engaging in more serious activities to prove their worth for

higher echelons with their gangs.

These results suggest that although preventative strategies are the best option, in cases where girls have already joined the gangs, intervention programs focused at female gang members should specifically target females who have just joined the gangs before they become too entrenched in gang structure and activities. Programs targeting newly recruited members are more likely to be successful and prevent females from getting more deeply involved in criminal activities. Such programs may include tailoring the program to individual member's needs and providing alternatives. Although the analysis indicates that gender does have an effect on the type, frequency, and severity of gang activities, the results also suggest that this difference is only in the initial stages. As discussed earlier, as members mature into gangs and become more experienced, the differences by gender begin to disappear and males and females engage in equally serious crimes. Thus in order to prevent further and more serious engagement by females the programs must target members at a early stage and or pre gang membership.

The results of this study reveal that although young adults with gang affiliation are more likely to hold negative perceptions and are more likely to be enticed by any organization that challenges authority and provides members with a sense of belonging and introduces gang members to terrorist activities, gang affiliation by itself is neither a certain nor an inevitable precursor to becoming a threat to homeland security and terrorism. Gang affiliated respondents were found to have more negative perceptions about the authority, law enforcement, and laws as well as more enthusiastic about engaging in illegal and criminal activities as compared to non-gang affiliated respondents. The respondents with negative perceptions about the authority, law enforcement, and laws were more likely to justify terrorist actions as compared to respondents with lesser degree of negative perceptions about the authority, law enforcement, and laws. The contribution of close affiliation and ties to gang membership to criminal gang activities was also examined. Gang membership was not found to independently affect justification for terrorist actions.

These results suggest a role for public policy. Early interventions to aid at-risk youths may divert these individuals from gang involvement and the violence and criminal activity associated with the gang. It is proposed that a comprehensive, multifaceted approach should be established for helping the youth in gang and their families. Such an approach should incorporate prevention, intervention and suppression activities. Communities in which gangs operate and families should be educated and solicited for assistance in helping the youth and preventing further gang activities. Further research is needed to examine this significant issue. The present study has provided some preliminary information addressing these significant questions. A more comprehensive research is needed to examine the relationship that may exist between gang affiliation and gender.. Research based on larger and random sample is necessary.

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