

Does Religion Matter? A Study of the Impact of Religion on Female Incarcerated Gang Members in a Bible Belt State

by

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Abstract

Knowledge about gang membership and activities substantially burgeoned in the last two decades. However, little attention has been focused on female gangs compared to male gang membership. Furthermore, literature is sparse on the role that religion and living in a religious environment plays in the decision making and gang membership proclivity of incarcerated females. This study seeks to close this gap in extant literature. To this end, the current study investigated the role of religion in the lives of 185 self-reported female gang members in a female correctional facility in North Carolina. Chi-Square analysis shows that a statistically significant relationship was observed between gang membership and belief in God/Supreme Being /Higher Power. However, regression analysis indicated that religiosity was an insignificant predictor of gang membership. Implications for professional service interventions, and study limitations are delineated.

Introduction

As male gangs proliferate in North Carolina, female gangs have correspondingly increased thus placing the responsibility of creating gang intervention strategies on numerous small rural towns and law enforcement agencies. Unsurprisingly gangs have migrated to rural towns precipitating a concern whether the migration of gangs has created an impact on the incarceration rates of female gang offenders in the adult prison system. However little is known about the similarity of female gangs' migration, compared to their male counterparts to southern states that are often regarded as religious and bible belt states (Egley, Mason, Miller & Klein, 2005). North Carolina is regarded as one of the Bible belt states, and recently experienced a surge in gang activity.

Concomitantly, with the upsurge in gang membership, criminal activities perpetrated by gangs have been documented in North Carolina (Oehme, 1997). However, information about the female gang membership and associated criminal activities in the state of North Carolina remains unknown. Consequently, the questions are: First, is the state of North Carolina in denial regarding female gangs as it had been in denial regarding male gangs? Secondly, are there female gangs in the

state and are there protective factors that should be considered to dissuade female gang membership? We hypothesize that religion will be an important factor, and protective in the lives self-reported female gang members in rural North Carolina.

To answer the aforementioned questions, this paper focuses on a study conducted at one the women's correctional facilities located in North Carolina. The women's correctional facility is an intake facility where many of the women are received, and decisions are thereafter, made as to which state facility they will be sent to serve out their sentences. The primary goal of this study was to determine if self-reported gang members housed in the facility, who identify as being religious, and living in a Bible belt state are influenced by religion. Given the proliferation of male gangs in North Carolina, it is expected that there will be a similar rise of female gangs.

Female Offenders

Females have been involved in criminal activity since biblical times (Genty, 2007). However, it has only been recent, within the 20th century that female gangs were considered worthy of research attention (Lauderdale and Burman, 2009; Pollak, 1978; Ross & Fabiano, 1986). Prior to the 1960s female offenders were not discussed extensively in the literature (Pollak, 1978). The reason for the scant literature was attributed to a misconception that females were not viewed as criminals (Adler, 1975). In addition, the culture in American society was basically patriarchal. Therefore, perception was that females were to be cared for, and in need of protection (Siegel, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that social scientists, especially criminal justice researchers, did not study female criminality with the same amount of research rigor and attention as they did with male criminality. Consequently, female criminals were said to be forgotten offenders (Adler & Simon, 1979; Lauderdale and Burman, 2009), and invisible women (Belknap, 2011). As a result individual women were seldom researched (Chesney-Lind, 2004).

After *Sisters in Crime*, (Adler, 1975) was published, many researchers began to rethink their research agenda, and the focus on female criminality emerged. Currently, the female crime rates in arrests have surpassed her male counterpart. Female correctional facilities have also experienced a great increase in inmates. According to statistics published by the Bureau of Justice, female correctional supervision has increased by 118% for the periods 1986-1997 (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2000). The increased arrest rates of females account for over 3.2 million arrests or 22% of all arrests (BJS 1999). Much of this increase is related to drug economy and gang-related activities (Baskin, Sommers & Fagan, 1993).

As the national rates increased so did the rates increase in individual states? North Carolina, for example, has experienced a tremendous increase in female inmates. Conversely, compared to national statistics, the arrest rate is slower (Genty, 2007). For North Carolina, the incarceration rate has increased which can be

expected as the arrest rates increased. In 1994, North Carolina's female correctional inmate population was 1,183. However, in November 2010, North Carolina Department of Corrections (NCDOC) reported 2,985 females incarcerated in the state (NCDOC, 2010). What is causing the increase in female incarceration in the state? A number of factors can be considered when addressing this question: women's liberation, drug economy, and gangs.

Women's Liberation

Historically, the women's liberation movement has been a contributing factor to the increased criminality among females, leading to arrest and incarceration (Genty, 2007). The women's movement that sent a wave of freedom among the nation's female population, allowed women to feel more secure and fostered the notion that women could do anything, which included criminal activity. Young girls were no longer stifled by the notion that they could only stay home and take care of the house and have babies (Baskin, Sommers & Fagan, 1993). And for those young girls working on the farms and in tobacco fields, there was a new awakening that they did not have to remain on the farms their entire lives. The media assisted with this re-socialization of rural females' perspectives as more and more women were depicted in movies and on television in roles not only as doctors, attorneys, judges, but also as criminals in exported gang-related criminal activities.

As females earned their positions in this newly formed society, they were clear that they were also equally good in mapping out plans for criminal activity. In North Carolina the female arrest rates have risen from 1,183 in 1994, to 2,709 in 2007, more than doubling in a short time span (NCDOC, 2007).

Drug Economy

The drug economy created a vehicle that allowed the female criminal to participate equally in criminal activity. Females started as mules (concealing drugs for drug dealers). They were so clever with their concealments that a position in drug subculture was and still is an easy method of gaining a position in the drug culture. While some rural females viewed the drug culture as a way out of a small town, many, unfortunately, were not able to escape, and continued in the drug world, not only using themselves, but their families as well as their babies to conceal drugs (baby diapers, baby strollers). Some also use their bodies as concealment centers (on their stomach as if pregnant, in their hair, and by ingestion of the drugs until they reach their destination). Many male gangs also use females not only as their mules, but also as their sex objects (drugs for sex). The drug economy has provided a vehicle for the female to become lucrative enough to go into business for herself or to form her own gang.

Gangs

Many street gangs will become involved in drug transactions and distribution

because drugs offer a get-rich process for them (Knox, 1994). In addition, some females view the gang as a means of escape from a terrible life where they may have been abused. (Adler, 1975). The gang serves the purpose of protection and provides them with what they deem to be love (Knox, 1994).

Knox (1995) suggests that female gang involvement can be delineated into three major categories: tradition, new wave, and hybrid. The description of the three categories is as follows:

- i. Traditional female gang members take on the role of admirers who adore the gang activity.
- ii. They are usually the girlfriends of male gang members, encouraging and supporting their gang criminal behaviors.
- iii. The women provide alibis for the males and do very little thinking on their own.
- iv. The males usually tell them what they should do and when they should do it.

Knox goes on to explain the second category of new wave as those females who want to work with the male gang members. These women are usually willing to take on physical assignments and tasks to prove their abilities. Knox's third category is hybrid with the gang membership totally female. These females have proven themselves to be physically equal to their male counterparts. They are not afraid to issue challenges to male gangs. According to Knox, the new phenomenon will continue to increase, and it is suspected that the increase will not only be in numbers, but in criminal activity as well.

Even with the acknowledged increase in female gangs (Knox & Robinson, 2004), the numbers of these female gangs are still relatively low (6%) compared to male gangs (National Gang Threat Assessment, 2005:10). Although females are participating in gang activities nationally, southern states still fall below the national average of female gangs and female gang members (Genty, 2007), and those states that are considered Bible Belt (religious) states are still experiencing low female gang activity. Although there has been a reported increase in male gang activity in North Carolina, there is very limited information on female gangs in the state. Therefore, there is a need to seek more information on the female gangs that are in the state, whether they actually exist and if religion plays a role in their lives.

Definition of Gangs

For purposes of this study, it is important to provide the definition of gang that we are using. Although there are numerous definitions of gangs, Thrasher (1927) started the definition process as he defined gangs in terms of territorial *spirit de corps* (p.46). He suggested that gangs form spontaneously to produce collective behavior. Klein expanded on Thrasher's definition and added involvement in delinquent incidents as criteria (Klein & Maxson, 2006). The North Carolina Governor's Crime

Commission has taken the position that gang definitions will vary, and thus a criterion has been established to test whether gang activity is involved. The test is to determine the following:

- i. If they acknowledge themselves as a gang
- ii. If they dress using gang colors and if they are involved in gang graffiti.
- iii. If they have been involved in delinquent behavior and
- iv. If they recognize a specific geographic area to operate

Based on the aforementioned, the focus of this paper is to consider whether southern states such as North Carolina (in the Bible belt) have female gangs and if they identify themselves as gang members and whether their southern religious upbringing matters when it comes to gang involvement.

Literature Review

Although females join gangs for many of the same reasons as their male counterparts, many of their reasons are female specific. For example, females have been designated as the primary care providers in the home (Campbell, 1987). As a gang member females do not have to feel the pressures of caring for others as each gang member is expected to be able to take care of self. Thus, the primary care provider syndrome is lifted from the female gang member.

In addition, many females join gangs because they have been victims of sexual abuse (Knox, 1995). The female gang provides them with a place where they can act out their frustrations onto others. Finally, the pretty girl syndrome is not an important factor as it is outside of the gang. If a female is able to fight and hold her own and accomplish criminal tasks well, appearance is not a winning factor in the gang. Thus, gangs provide a self-esteem builder for females who may not be considered attractive by societal standards. Knox (1995) notes that “girls who become gang members suffer from lower self esteem than their male counterparts” (p.69). Thus, female gang membership offers a social support for many females. Campbell (1987) notes that gangs also offer females opportunity that they cannot gain outside of the gang.

Religion and Crime Deterrence

The church at one time was viewed as the vehicle to capture the attention of females and provide them with a crime deterrent as well as a means to continue their supportive care-taking roles (Genty, 2007). But how is it that religion can be considered a crime deterrent? Barnes and Teeters (1965) suggested that it is difficult to determine the relationship between criminal behavior and religiosity because of the religious value system and the difficulty to measure supernatural entities.

Hirsch and Stark (1969) conducted a study considering the impact of religion on delinquency. Burkette and White (1974) noted that Hirsch and Stark used offenders in their study that were not only offensive to the church but equally disapproved of

in society (assault, vandalism and theft). More recently religiously sponsored faith-based organizations (FBOs) have been identified as providing effective interventions that reduces recidivism (Dodson, Cabage & Klenowski, 2011; Duwe & King, 2013).

Using different offenses in their study, Burkett and White also discovered a relationship between religious involvement and the avoidance of marijuana use and drinking (Albrecht, Chadwick, Alcorn, 1977). Watson (1991) focused on gangs and noted that those youth who are less religious are at greater risk of joining a gang. Wiederhold (1997), when considering a Mormon area of Utah, examined gang membership and 28 other variables using religion as one of the 28 variables. The conclusion was that there is a statistically significant relationship between religiosity and gang involvement. However, despite the laudable effects on religion on crime deterrence Topalli, Brezina & Bernhardt (2013) cautioned that religion could provide a paradoxical “counterintuitive criminogenic effect” (p.49) such as intentionally distorting reality through religious beliefs.

Benda and Corwyn (1997) considered the role of the family as they looked at religion and delinquency. They, however, viewed levels of religious commitment in relation to delinquency. They concluded that the level of the youth’s religiosity and church attendance was related to delinquent behavior. Johnson and Larson (1998) explored faith and the criminal justice system. They discovered that religion served as a protective risk factor. Johnson, Jing, Larson, and Li (2001) expanded on Johnson and Larson’s 1998 study to determine more about the aspects of religion on delinquency. They discovered that even after considering other variables that were not religious, there is a relationship between religiosity and delinquent behavior. So religion as a deterrent has been empirically proven; yet, many intervention strategies, specifically correctional facilities, do not capitalize on the use of religion as a deterrent factor.

Relationship between Religion and Gang Membership

Although there is empirical evidence to suggest that there is a relationship between religiosity and criminal behavior, the literature is very limited on the role of religion among female gang members. To our knowledge the only two studies focused on the relationship between religion and female gang membership. The first study was conducted by Elizabeth Marsal among female gang members serving in a female correction facility (See Marsal, 2009). Marshal reported that incarcerated female gang members affirmed that religion enhances their sense of wellbeing, meaning in life, and contributed to their belief in a higher power or the existence of God. The second study was conceptual argument by Hamid Kusha for the rarity of female gangs among Muslims (Kusha, 2009). Kusha opined that the protective structures and supervised public engagement of women in tradition Islamic religion serve as an inhibitive reason against female gang formation in Islam. In addition, Kusha (2009) posited that the patriarchal composition of the most elementary groups

in Islam also serve as a deterrent to formation of female gangs among Muslims.

Nevertheless, Marsal (2009) noted that no empirical relationship exists between religion and female gang membership. Hence a gap exists in extant literature on the role that religion plays in the lives of female gang members. The current study was therefore conducted to fill this gap in the literature. However, because North Carolina has been in a state of denial about gangs and gang activity, to survey an adult female correctional facility now may provide more insight into this situation as the female arrest rates have increased. The thinking was to survey women who had participated in criminal behavior to determine if there was any self-reported gang membership and gang activity as opposed to surveying an adolescent female correctional facility where inmates are theoretically just coming into (experiencing) the gang culture. Therefore, these two research questions were explored:

- i. What are the religious preferences of incarcerated female gang member?
- ii. Is there is a relationship between religion and female gang membership?

Methodology

Subjects and Procedure

The subjects (n=185) were females from a North Carolina correctional center for women who volunteered to participate in the study. The women ranged in age from 18 years to 61 years, with their mean average age 39.27. Their offenses ranged from serious violent offenses (8.1%) to public ordered offenses (36.2%) with the racial composition being 61.6% white (not of Hispanic origin), 30.3% African American; and 4.3% American Indian.

Permission was granted by the University IRB and the state of North Carolina's correctional IRB to conduct research in the women's correctional facility. The women were given a choice to volunteer to participate as the research purpose was explained to the inmates. Of the 350 inmates, 185 inmates volunteered to participate. They met with the researchers in the auditorium of the facility where the researchers explained the purpose of the project and again emphasized that it was voluntary. After they agreed to participate, they were told that we would be using three different rooms as they divided themselves and went to the three assigned areas. The goal was to ensure that all of the women felt comfortable taking the survey. The smaller groups allowed the researchers an opportunity to assist any women who may have been illiterate without drawing attention to the inmate's difficulty. The instrument was survey questions from the National gang research crime center (1997) and questions derived from the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Bufford, Paloutzian, & Ellison, 1991). It took only about 45 minutes for the inmates to complete the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Before analyzing the specific relationship between religion and female gang

members, an overview of the sample population was warranted. The Table 1 presents the race, age, current offense, length of current offense, and religious preference of the sample population. As observed in Table 1, out of the 185 respondents in the sample, only nine reported being in a street gang. In addition it can be observed from the Table 1 that female gang members make up 4.9 percent of the respondents; however seven respondents declined to answer.

Examining the demographics of the self-reported gang members, Table 1 shows that they are evenly divided between white and non-white. Non-white includes Black, American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic-Mexican, Hispanic-Puerto Rican, Hispanic-Cuban and other. In addition it can be noticed that religious preferences of both gang and non-gang members were similar as observed in Table 1. The majority of both groups chose the “other” category, which includes Southern Baptist, a predominant Christian denomination in North Carolina.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Race	Frequency	Percent
White (not of Hispanic origin)	114	61.6
Black (not of Hispanic origin)	56	30.3
American Indian	8	4.3
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	0.5
Hispanic - Puerto Rican	3	1.6
Other Hispanic	2	1.1
Unknown	1	0.5
Total	185	100.0
Age Range		
18-25 Years Old	8	4.3
26-35 Years Old	57	30.8
Over 35 Years Old	115	62.2
Total	180	97.3
Missing	5	2.7
Total	185	
	Mean = 39.27	Median=39 Mode=37
Types of Offence		
Violent Offenses	15	8.1
Property Offenses	52	28.1
Drug Offenses	43	23.2
Public-Order Offenses	67	36.2
Other Offenses	2	1.1
Total	179	96.8
Missing	6	3.2
Total	185	100.0
Length of Offense		
6 Months or Less	85	45.9
7 -12 Months	50	27.0
13 - 24 Months	32	17.3
25 Months or Longer	13	7.0
Total	180	97.3
Missing	5	2.7
Total	185	100.0

Table 1: Continued

Religious Preference	Frequency	Percent
None	9	4.9
Protestant	77	41.6
Catholic	9	4.9
Islamic	1	0.5
Other	86	46.5
Total	182	98.4
Missing	3	1.6
Total	185	100.0

Membership of Street Gangs

	Frequency	Percent
No	168	90.8
Yes	9	4.9
Total	177	95.7
Missing	7	3.8
System	1	0.5
Total	8	4.3
Total	185	100.0

The questions derived from the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Bufford, Paloutzian & Ellison, 1991) were tested first to assess the reliability and validity of the religiosity questions (questions 4-9) since they had not been administered before (Genty, 2007, p. 33). A Cronbach's alpha test was used for this, and the result of the reliability is seen in Table 2a.

Table 2: Reliability and Item-Total Statistics**2a: Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.546	.794	6 out of 6

2b: Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if item Deleted	Corrected item - total Correlation	Squared multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item deleted
Religious preference	6.23	10.853	-.123	.027	.887
Satisfaction in religion	7.89	10.284	.514	.618	.437
Belief in God	7.99	10.320	.613	.752	.424
There is meaning to my life	7.91	9.824	.616	.699	.400
Sense of well-being from religion	7.83	9.698	.594	.670	.399
Belief in real purpose for life	7.80	9.473	.473	.401	.422

With an alpha of 0.794, the set of questions prove reliable. In order to determine if any single question is ineptly weak, the Cronbach’s alpha test was used to determine the overall item-total statistics as can be observed in Table 2b. It is evident that the respondent’s religious preference is an inadequate measure of her overall religiosity based on the alpha increasing when the item is removed.

Cross Tabulations of Respondents

Cross tabulation was used to assess and understand the respondents’ responses to their membership in a street gang and satisfaction in religion. The likert-type scoring shows that nine of the respondents who identified as being a gang member stated that they found satisfaction in religion (Table 3a). However 140 non-gang members were satisfied in religion. Moreover, it is also observable that 5 percent of gang members believed in God/Supreme Being/Higher Power compared to 95 percent of non-gang members as indicated in Table 3b.

Table 3: Cross-Tabulations of Respondents

3a: Race and Membership of a Street Gang
Count

Membership in a street gang		Race		Total
		White	Non-White	
Membership in a street gang	No	104	64	168
	Yes	5	4	9
	Total	109	68	177

3b: Membership of a Street Gang and Satisfaction in Religion

Satisfied in religion:	Membership in a street gang		
	No	Yes	Total
Strongly Agree	140	9	149
Moderately Agree	12	0	12
Agree	10	0	10
Disagree	1	0	1
Strongly Disagree	3	0	3
Total	166	9	175

3c: Membership of a Street Gang and Belief in God/Supreme Being
Membership in a street gang

Belief in God/Supreme Being/Higher Power:	Membership in a street gang		
	No	Yes	Total
Strongly Agree	157	8	165
Moderately Agree	1	1	2
Agree	7	0	7
Strongly Disagree	2	0	2
Total	167	9	176

Chi-Square Analysis

Both gang members and non-gang members appear to have a strong affiliation with religiosity. However to a chi-square analysis test was used to assess the strength of the relationship between the variables. Table 4 shows that the only variable regarding religiosity in the questions the respondents were surveyed with indicated that a statistically significant relationship was observed between gang membership and belief in God/Supreme Being /Higher Power ($X^2 = 0.032$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 4: Chi-Square Tests for Belief in God/Supreme Being/Higher Power and Membership in a Street Gang

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.814(a)	3	.032
Likelihood Ratio	4.248	3	.236
Linear-by-Linear Association	.029	1	.864
N of Valid Cases	176		

5 cells (62.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .10.

Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to test the overall predictability of religiosity had on gang involvement. Table 5 shows the R Square category, which describes the goodness-of-fit measure (also called the coefficient of determination). The regression analysis also provides a measure for the percentage of variation of the dependent variable which can be correlated to the predictor variable (Genty, 2007).

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Religiosity & Membership in a Street Gang Model Summary (b)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.156(a)	.024	-.012	.216	.024	.665	6	159	.678

a Predictors: (Constant), Belief in real purpose for life, Religious preference, Satisfaction in religion, Sense of well-being from religion, There is meaning to my life, Belief in God / Supreme Being / Higher Power

b Dependent Variable: Membership in a street gang

ANOVA (b)

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.186	6	.031	.665	.678(a)
	Residual	7.428	159	.047		
	Total	7.614	165			

The result of the regression analysis shows that the value of R Square value is 0.024. This indicates that a respondent's religiosity accounts for only 2.4% of the overall variation in gang membership ($F(6, 165) = 0.665, p = 0.678$ (*Adjusted R*² = -0.012). The implication is that other unknown variables account for 97.6% in variation in gang membership. In fact, when adjusted for all the variables in the equation, the Adjusted R Square is negative indicating that religiosity has a slightly negative effect on gang involvement. The F statistic in the analysis of variance (ANOVA) table explains that the effect of religiosity on gang involvement is not significant; indicating that religiosity itself does not consistently predict gang involvement.

Discussion

The female inmates in this study confirmed the alternate hypothesis that religion does play a major role in their lives. Both gang and non-gang members have a strong affiliation with religiosity; however, we cannot deduce that religiosity influences gang membership or non-gang membership because the gang sample size is too small. However, on the other hand, we could speculate that the sample size is so small because the Bible belt has had an influence on females and thus has helped to decrease gang involvement. Based on their responses, we know that they have a strong belief in God as a Supreme Being or a higher power.

Study Limitations

Although this study is a beginning process, it is not without limitations. The women's correctional center is a diagnostic facility and women are sent to the correctional facility to determine which facility they will be sent to for the duration of their sentence. Therefore, surveying all of the female facilities would prove very beneficial in terms of gang members that may be increasing in the state. In addition, the very small number of females who professed to be gang members is too small to make valid statistical inferences. However, it does provide us with some indication that female gangs are in North Carolina, and it is anticipated that correctional facilities will begin to feel the impact as female gang membership increases in the state.

Conclusion

This study further reiterates the need for more research with this particular population. Female gangs are becoming popular in rural North Carolina, and there is an urgent need to consider intervention strategies. However, there should be a continuing effort to determine the nature and scope of the problem. For example, to what extent are female gangs increasing in the state? What are the other variables that account for female gang memberships? This can be accomplished by more research conducted in the other six female correctional facilities in the state.

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