

“A Comparison of Gang and Non-Gang Involved Adult Probationers in California’s Agricultural Heartland”

by

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Abstract

In recent years gangs in the United States have increasingly emerged in non-urban settings. It is also becoming more common for gang members to extend their gang involvement into adulthood, yet most gang researchers have limited their attention to juveniles in urban gangs. Moreover, prior researchers have focused almost exclusively on policing when examining the justice system’s responses to gangs, thereby neglecting the role of probation. In light of these trends, this study employed official probation department data to examine adult probationers in a small agricultural county in California. Probationers on the gang caseload were compared to non-gang members on a range of dimensions, including but not limited to background characteristics, offending history, and recidivism. Several notable differences between gang and non-gang involved probationers were found, and implications for probation practices and the gang literature are discussed.

*All opinions and conclusions presented in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the viewpoints or official positions of the Sutter County Probation Department.

Introduction

Nearly a century ago, Frederic Thrasher (1927) studied 1,313 juvenile gangs in Chicago and found that a number of urban conditions, including community instability, poor housing, and cultural diversity, were associated with gang activity. Thrasher’s seminal work set the precedent for viewing gangs as an urban problem, and prominent theoretical traditions such as social disorganization (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Shaw and McKay, 1942), sub-culture (Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958), and strain (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) theories went on to broaden the urban scope through which gangs were examined. The connection between gangs and metropolitan areas is now well established and often taken for granted, as evidenced

by the assertion in a leading gang textbook that “the existence of gangs is rooted in community and city conditions” (Howell, 2012: 87).

Gangs are undeniably one of the most intractable urban problems in the United States. However, over the past few decades gangs have also sprouted up in agricultural and other non-urban regions (Howell and Egley, 2005; Weisheit and Wells, 2004). Though it is debated whether this trend reflects the expansion of big city gangs into local markets (Allender, 2001; Monti, 1994) or the emergence of homegrown gangs within smaller communities (Maxson, 1998), it is clear that gang problems are no longer confined to the inner city. Nonetheless, contemporary scholars have continued to focus almost exclusively on gangs in larger urban areas, which is demonstrated clearly by high profile gang studies conducted in Boston (Jankowski, 1991), Chicago (Venkatesh, 2008; Padilla, 1992; Pattillo, 1998), Columbus (Miller, 2001), Denver (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993), Kansas City (Fleisher, 1998), Los Angeles (Leap, 2012; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 2002; Vigil, 2007), Milwaukee (Hagedorn, 1988), New York (Jankowski, 1991; Pinderhughes, 1997), Rochester (Thornberry et al., 2003), San Antonio (Valdez, 2007), Seattle (Hill et al., 2001), and St. Louis (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Miller, 2001).

Almost all of the studies cited above examined juveniles rather than adults, which underscores the fact that researchers have focused their attention primarily on youthful gang members (Barker 2012). However, recent findings from the National Youth Gang Survey suggest that adult gang members now outnumber juvenile gang members in many jurisdictions within the United States (National Gang Center, N.D.). Much has changed in the years since Thrasher published his ground breaking work on juveniles in urban gangs, and in turn there is now a greater need for research on older gang members whose gang activity occurs in non-urban regions.

Toward this end, this study examines differences between gang and non-gang involved adult probationers from a smaller county within California’s agricultural heartland. We begin by highlighting key findings from the gang literature. We then segue into descriptions of the rural area we focused on, the official probation department data that were analyzed, and the analytic strategy that was adopted. We go on to present our findings and then conclude by proposing implications for probation practices and the gang literature.

Prior research on the justice system’s responses to gangs has focused almost exclusively on policing strategies (Decker, 2003; Huff, 2002). Gang researchers have typically neglected the relationships between gangs and probation, yet probation is the most commonly used sentencing disposition in the United States (Petersilia, 1997). Scholars (Leet et al., 2000: 269) and justice professionals (United States Courts, 2006) alike have noted that gangs are now among the most pressing challenges that probation officers face. Accordingly, this study addresses the need for more research on gang probationers and probation strategies by providing insights into adult gang members who were on probation in a non-urban setting.

Key Findings from Prior Studies

Data from the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) have revealed several important patterns with respect to gang prevalence and membership. The NYGS is a national survey of law enforcement agencies that has been carried out by the National Gang Center each year since 1996 (Howell and Egley, 2005). The NYGS is widely regarded as the most comprehensive source for gang information because it has a high response rate and its coverage ranges from small rural towns to large urban areas throughout the United States.

The most recent NYGS results are from 2011 and will be formally presented in an upcoming publication issued by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In the meantime, an in-depth summary of the 2011 findings has been made available on the National Gang Center's website (National Gang Center, N.D.). These findings show that the number of agencies reporting gang problems since the NYGS's inception was highest in the early-to-mid 1990s. This number then began dropping sharply in the late 1990s before shooting back up beginning in the early 2000s. Since the mid-2000s the number of agencies reporting gang problems has remained steady at a level close to what was seen in the earlier 1990s when rates were highest. This general pattern has been equally consistent across the large cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas that were surveyed.

Gang problems were reported by one third of the agencies contacted in the most recent wave of the NYGS. Though gangs were found in all types of regions, they were most common in urban areas. For instance, gangs were reported to be a problem in 85% of the large cities examined, which can be compared to 50% of the suburbs, 30% of the smaller cities, and 14% of the rural areas.

Gangs were a chronic fixture in most of the larger cities, but their presence was more sporadic from year to year in a majority of the non-urban areas that reported gangs. Other researchers have also noted that the presence of gangs is often temporary in nonmetropolitan areas (Howell and Egley 2005). Non-urban gang members have additionally been involved with less serious forms of offending when compared to their urban counterparts (Howell and Egley 2005), which likely accounts for why gangs were considered to be a serious problem in less than half of the rural communities in which they were reported (Weisheit and Wells, 2004).

A final finding from the 2011 NYGS that will be noted here is that most agencies reporting gangs indicated that there were more adult than juvenile gang members in their jurisdictions. Urban areas were most likely to feature this pattern, while non-urban locations tended to report similar numbers of adult and juvenile gang members. When considering that today's gang members are more likely to be adults when compared to those from past generations (Klein, 1995: 105), these trends strongly suggest that more research on older gang members is needed.

There are myriad reasons to be concerned about gangs. Aside from the threats they pose to communities, those who join them end up having worse

outcomes than those who do not. For instance, Thornberry et al. (1993) compared gang members to non-gang members with otherwise matching profiles and found that the gang members were more violent. It is important to note that gang members' higher levels of violence occurred during periods of gang involvement rather than before or after they were in gangs, which strongly suggests that simply being in a gang is criminogenic. Although most of the research has focused on how gang membership increases offending, there is evidence that being in a gang also leads to poorer education and employment outcomes over the life course (Pyrooz, 2012).

In sum, NYGS data show that the prevalence of gangs has increased in both urban and non-urban areas since the late 1990s. Gangs are especially entrenched in large cities, though they are present in many small towns and rural areas as well. Non-urban gangs have been found to be less stable, less involved in serious crime, and less likely to be perceived as a problem when compared to gangs in urban areas. Non-urban areas are also less likely to have gangs from multiple racial groups because minority groups in these settings typically do not have enough potential members to draw from (Weisheit et al., 2006). It may therefore be problematic to assume that non-urban gangs can be explained using findings from the urban gang literature (Wells and Weisheit, 2001).

Overall, in many jurisdictions in the United States the gang members are more likely to be adults than juveniles. Moreover, gang members as a whole are now more likely to be older than they were in the past. Comparisons of gang and non-gang involved youth indicate that being in a gang facilitates offending and other problems for gang members. Accordingly, more needs to be done to address the gang problem, and current trends suggest that these efforts should be informed by research on adult gang members and gang members in non-urban areas.

Sutter County

The region focused on in this study is Sutter County, California, which had a total population of 95,022 in 2012 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Sutter County is located approximately 425 miles (684 kilometers) north of Los Angeles and is routinely referred to as "The Dirty 530" within youth and gang subcultures in Northern California. This moniker is a play on the 530 area code, and it is frequently invoked by gangs when making territorial claims.

When compared to rates for the state of California as a whole, Sutter County has fewer persons per square mile¹, more persons below poverty, lower per capita incomes, fewer college graduates, more persons under 18, and a lower median value of owner-occupied housing units (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Simply put, Sutter County features a young and more socially disadvantaged non-urban population. Sutter County is also racially diverse, with a population that is 49.0% Caucasian, 29.3% Latino, 16.1% Asian, 2.4% African-American, 2.3% Native American, and 4.1% identifying with more than one race (United States Census

Bureau, 2012). We suspect that a large number of undocumented migrant farm workers from Mexico and other nations make Sutter County more heterogeneous than the official figures indicate.

Whereas Los Angeles is in a large urban area that has long been known for being one of the World's gang capitals, Sutter County is in a relatively nondescript agricultural region. In 1971, the serial killer Juan Corona was convicted in Sutter County for killing 25 farm laborers and then burying their bodies in a field (Appeal Democrat, 2011). This high profile case brought international attention at the time and was the area's most infamous crime for many years. However, memories of Juan Corona have begun to fade away, and gangs are the main crime story in Sutter County today.

Gang problems have been well publicized within Sutter County. For instance, Figure 1 presents a sample of media headlines that correspond with recent incidents that allegedly involved gangs. These headlines do not comprise an exhaustive list of Sutter County's gang headlines or incidents. They were instead chosen for inclusion in Figure 1 because they portray the racial diversity underlying Sutter County's gang problem and show that Sutter County's gangs are involved with serious offending that goes beyond garden variety delinquency. Though not apparent from the headlines, many of these incidents involved conflicts between Norteno and Sureno gangs. Nortenos and Surenos are broader alliances of Latino gangs in California and other western states (Fuentes, 2006; Moreno, 2006; Valdez, 2009: 131), and the majority of gang incidents in Sutter County can be attributed to rivalries between these groups.

The headlines in Figure 1 show that Sutter County's gangs are multiracial, violent, and recognized as a problem within the community. Sutter County therefore differs from most of the non-urban gang areas examined in the NYGS in two important ways. First, its gangs appear to be involved in more serious forms of offending. Second, its gang problem features Caucasians, Latinos, and Asians and is therefore not confined to one racial group.

Data and Methods

Official data from the Sutter County Probation Department were analyzed for this project². All adults over 18 who were on felony probation in Sutter County during the 1/1/10-9/30/12 time period were included in the analyses ($N=634$)³. Ethnographies, surveys of law enforcement agencies, self-report youth surveys, and secondary analyses of general survey data are the conventional methods employed in gang research. Our use of official probation department data therefore diverges from most of the other studies found in the gang literature.

Our analytic strategy replicated the approach taken by Adams and Olson (2002) in their analyses of data from the 2000 Illinois Probation Outcome Study. These data were from a sample of 'more than 3300 probationers' who were on adult probation throughout the state of Illinois. Adams and Olson compared gang and non-gang probationers on a variety of dimensions and found that gang members were more likely to be younger, racial minorities, and male. Gang members were also more likely to have had a substance abuse history and to have never been married. They were less likely to have been employed when they were sentenced, and compared to non-gang involved probationers they were also less likely to have parented a child or completed high school.

Adams and Olson's data were from a sample rather than a population, and most of the gang members in their study were from Chicago and other urban areas. Our work is therefore unique in that we focused on an entire population of gang-involved adult probationers from a non-urban region.

Given that Adams and Olson's research is the only prior study we found that used probation data to examine gang members, we adopted their approach as a template and compared gang and non-gang involved probationers on a number of dimensions pertaining to background characteristics, offending history, and recidivism.

In Sutter County an arresting agency can validate someone as a gang member if he or she meets certain conditions. For instance, sample criteria used for gang validation include self-admission of gang membership, affiliation with known gang members, frequenting known gang areas, getting arrested with known gang members for offenses consistent with gang activity, and wearing gang attire. This is not an exhaustive list of all of the criteria that are used, and a combination of factors rather than one indicator alone is needed for validation. Once an offender is validated as a gang member by the arresting agency, it is then ultimately up to the sentencing judge

to determine whether or not a probationer receives gang conditions and is placed on the gang caseload.

Findings

Several important differences between gang and non-gang involved adult probationers were found, and results are organized below around three themes. First, a series of background characteristics were examined. Figure 2 presents findings on background characteristics in which gang and non-gang involved probationers differed, while Figure 3 presents findings on background characteristics in which these two groups were similar.

Figure 2: Background Differences Between Non-Gang and Gang Affiliated Probationers

Figure 3: Background Similarities Between Non-Gang and Gang Affiliated Probationers

Like Adams and Olson (2002), we found that when compared to other probationers gang members were more likely to be younger, racial minorities, and male. We also found that they were more likely to have never been married, and compared to non gang involved probationers they were less likely to have completed high school or to have been employed when sentenced. However, unlike Adams and Olson we found that gang members were not more likely to have had substance abuse histories, nor were they less likely to have parented a child.

Second, a series of factors pertaining to offending history were examined. Figure 4 presents findings on whether or not gang and non-gang involved probationers had juvenile adjudications, prior adult convictions, and violent crimes as their current offense. While gang involved probationers were not more likely to have had prior adult convictions, they were more likely than their non-gang involved peers to have had juvenile adjudications and violent offenses as their current offense.

Figure 4: about here

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Third, a series of recidivism indicators were examined that show how well probationers adjusted while under supervision. Figure 5 presents findings on violations of probation, the commission of new felony offenses, and revocations of probation resulting in prison. Overall, gang involved probationers were not more likely than non-gang involved probationers to have violations of probation. However, they were more likely to have committed new felony offenses and to have had revocations resulting in prison.

Figure 5: about here

When taken together, these findings clearly show that gang members on probation were distinctive from non gang members. For instance, gang probationers were more likely than non-gang probationers to be younger, nonwhite, and male with lower levels of education and employment. Moreover, gang members were also more likely to have had juvenile adjudications, violent crimes as their current offenses, new felony offenses while under supervision, and revocations resulting in prison. The sections that follow present implications of these findings for probation practices and gang research.

Implications: Probation Practices

Huff (2002) identified prevention, intervention, and suppression as the main objectives of gang policies. All three of these are crucial when addressing the gang problem because each focuses on a different stage of the gang membership trajectory. However, policing and suppression strategies have typically been the most common gang response, and in turn they have received the most attention (Decker, 2003; Huff, 2002).

In their presentation of the American Probation and Parole Association's C.A.R.E. model for responding to gangs, DeMichele and Matz (2010: 36) argued that "we cannot punish our way out of gang and gun violence; a more holistic approach [is] needed to blend prevention, suppression, intervention and reentry into a comprehensive strategy." DeMichele and Matz went on to outline the precepts of C.A.R.E., which are collaboration, analysis, reentry, and evaluation. C.A.R.E. can generally be described as a comprehensive, multifaceted program that is grounded in evidence based practices. The same can be said of Vigil's (2010) balanced anti-gang

strategy and the widely acclaimed Operation Ceasefire program that is credited with reducing gang violence in Boston (Braga et al., 2001). These models are all similar in that they each feature inter-organizational collaboration, address multiple needs, and have been informed by findings from prior studies. Accordingly, a general implication for probation that can be inferred from the literature is that gang programming should be coordinated across agencies, holistic, and guided by research.

Three additional implications for probation practices extend from our findings. The Sutter County data show that gang members on probation had more serious offending profiles than non-gang probationers. They were also more likely to have had juvenile adjudications. Accordingly, a first implication is that more gang prevention and early intervention strategies with juveniles are needed in order to decrease the odds that they will one day land on the adult probation gang caseload. Given that gang members in Sutter County and Illinois (Adams and Olson, 2002) were more likely than non-gang involved probationers to be younger, nonwhite, and male with poor education and employment backgrounds, extra attention should be given to understanding and addressing the specific needs of those who fall within these categories.

Urban youth have typically been the focus of gang research and policy, yet prevention programs that target juveniles in rural areas may be crucial given that they have a greater juvenile-to-adult gang member ratio than urban areas (National Gang Center, N.D.). Moreover, exceptionally high rates of gang membership have been found in some rural communities (Evans et al., 1999). One potential strategy for preventing juveniles from joining gangs is to adopt the Gang Resistance Education and Training program (G.R.E.A.T.). G.R.E.A.T. entails having law enforcement personnel provide anti-gang programming in schools, and evaluation studies have found that it has successfully kept kids out of gangs in many jurisdictions (Esbensen et al., 2011). In Sutter County, officers from the probation department currently deliver G.R.E.A.T. in local schools. However, no evaluations have been conducted to date on the Sutter County Probation Department's execution of G.R.E.A.T.

A second implication of the Sutter County findings is that intervention for gang members who are on probation is crucial. Compared to their non-gang peers, gang probationers were more likely to have felony offenses while under supervision. They were also more likely to have revocations resulting in prison. The data therefore indicate that gang members were involved in more serious offending while on probation than those who were not in gangs, which suggests that intervention programming may be needed to pull these offenders off their criminal tracks.

At the same time, being on the gang caseload brings more scrutiny than regular probation. It is therefore possible that gang members may have shown these results because they were watched more closely. Moreover, we wonder whether the increased attention that comes from being on the gang caseload might

unintentionally increase gang cohesion (Klein, 1995) or facilitate the further crystallization of gang identities among gang members. We recommend that probation departments carefully consider these possibilities when intervening with probationers who have been placed on gang caseloads or who otherwise receive gang conditions.

A third implication is that gang members are unique among probationers and may therefore require special programming and increased supervision in order to suppress their criminal activity (Adams and Olson, 2002). In addition to offending more as juveniles and having worse outcomes while under supervision, the Sutter County gang probationers were also more likely to have had violent crimes as their current offenses. Gang members may have engaged in violent gang initiations or other violent acts that increased cohesion among their groups. They may have also developed gang identities that led them to act more violently than non-gang members. Though the reasons why gang probationers in Sutter County were more violent than non-gang probationers cannot be deciphered with our data, their unique profiles and offending patterns suggest that special gang caseloads are warranted.

One of the more promising strategies for responding to gangs is to take a team approach. For instance, previous research suggests that partnerships between police and probation may improve supervision with more serious offenders (Matz and Kim, 2013). Different agencies and service providers can also come together and establish a division of labor, and each entity can then be responsible for fulfilling a particular role based on its expertise (Arciaga, 2007). Organizations can potentially develop procedures for information sharing, which is commonly recommended as a best practice when supervising gang members (Jackson and McBride, 2000; United States Courts, 2006).

The team approach was taken in Sutter County with the formation of the Sutter County Gang Task Force. Participants include the probation department, police department, district attorney's office, and other organizations, and key functions include providing ongoing training for staff and facilitating the sharing of information. Although the Sutter County Gang Task Force is well regarded within the community, its effectiveness has yet to be formally evaluated by researchers.

Probation plays a dynamic role in the justice system, and when compared to other justice system components it is uniquely situated to deliver holistic responses that include prevention, intervention, and suppression. Hence we believe that probation needs to become more central in policy discussions pertaining to gangs. In order for this to happen, probation will need to be properly funded in the future.

Despite the fact that probation is the most commonly used disposition in the United States, it has historically been underfunded when compared to institutional corrections (Petersilia, 1997). This may finally be changing in California due to the public safety realignment that began in 2011 (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, N.D.). Public safety realignment was devised as a solution to

California's chronically overcrowded and expensive prison system. It requires non-serious, non-violent, and non-sex offenders to now be handled by county jails and probation departments rather than state prisons and parole agents, which is a marked departure from past practices. It remains to be seen whether the additional burdens placed on probation departments will be accompanied by sufficient funding increases.

Overall, chronic budget problems in jurisdictions throughout the United States have resulted in deep budget cuts for social services, law enforcement, and other organizations that are addressing gang problems. For instance, California previously established the Office of Gang and Youth Violence Policy. However, visitors to the webpage for this office are now met with the following message: "PLEASE NOTE: Senate Bill 92 (2011) abolished funding for the Office of Gang and Youth Violence Policy. THE OFFICE CLOSED ON DECEMBER 31, 2011" (California Governor's Office, N.D.). Sadly, the growth of gangs since the late 1990s has been met with shrinking budgets rather than sufficient funding for prevention, intervention, and suppression.

Implications: Gang Research

As noted throughout this article, the gang literature has mostly neglected non-urban gang members, adult gang members, gang probationers, gang probation practices, and the use of official probation department data to study gangs. Accordingly, a general implication for the gang research is that more studies need to be conducted on each of these topics. Two additional implications pertain to the use of comparison groups in gang research and the presence of multi-racial gangs and serious gang offenders in non-urban areas.

With respect to comparison groups, several studies have compared gang and non-gang members and found that the gang members were more involved with offending (Hill et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 1993). Most of these studies focused on samples of youth who were recruited in school settings. By way of contrast, we examined adults who were under the supervision of the justice system and who had received the same sentencing disposition. Adams and Olson (2002) are the only other researchers we are aware of that have taken a similar approach. We therefore believe that future gang research should expand beyond the use of youth comparison groups to include adults and individuals with similar criminal justice system dispositions.

Moreover, we believe that non-urban comparison groups should also be utilized. Klein's (2005) comprehensive summary of the comparisons used within gang research outlined several compelling examples of how comparisons have added to our knowledge, yet non-urban gang members were not included among the comparison groups that were presented. This omission suggests that the potential benefits of using non-urban gang members in gang research have yet to be actualized.

With respect to diversity and serious offending, non-urban regions have traditionally been less likely to feature gangs from multiple racial groups, less likely to suffer from long term gang problems, and less likely to have gang members engaged in serious offending. By way of contrast, we studied gang members from a non-urban area with a multiracial gang problem that is chronic and violent. Though we did not conduct a community study per se, the profiles and offending patterns of the gang probationers in Sutter County suggest that they were more similar to urban gang members than the non-urban gang members depicted in prior research. In order to better specify the precursors to gang activity in both urban and non-urban areas, we believe that more research is needed on non-urban gang members from regions that feature more diversity and more serious offending.

Concluding Thoughts

Gangs have traditionally been regarded as an urban issue, gang members have typically been thought of as being juveniles, and responses to gang problems have usually focused on policing strategies. Urban areas in fact have gang problems, many gang members are without question young, and police undoubtedly play an indispensable role in addressing gangs. However, gangs are found in non-urban areas as well, gang members are also adults, and probation is a crucial component of the justice system's response to gang problems. Prior researchers have rarely examined non-urban gangs or adult gang members, nor have they given much attention to relationships between gangs and probation. We believe this is problematic, and we hope our work will serve as a catalyst for future research on these topics.

Our analyses were limited to one jurisdiction. Our findings may therefore not generalize to other regions given that probation practices, community contexts, and other variables differ from one place to the next. Bearing this in mind, the congruence between our results and those reported by Adams and Olson (2002) leave us convinced that gang and non-gang involved probationers differ in some fundamental ways. These differences have implications for caseload planning and supervision, and more probation departments will need to address them if gangs continue to become more prevalent in the future.

Some of our conclusions on the importance of prevention, intervention, and suppression may not have been novel. Nonetheless, our data clearly show that each of these objectives needs further attention from practitioners and researchers. Toward this end, future studies will hopefully tell us more about the background characteristics, offending histories, and recidivism outcomes of adults, non-urban gang members, and other offending populations that have thus far been underrepresented in the gang literature. Ideally, future studies will lead to better gang responses as well.

Notes

1. Sutter County has 157.3 persons per square mile, which can be compared to 239.1 for the state of California and 2419.6 for Los Angeles County (United States Census Bureau, 2012).
2. The data analyzed in this study are restricted and are not accessible to individuals outside of the Sutter County Probation Department.
3. This time period was used because the data were from a broader data collection cycle conducted by the Sutter County Probation Department that coincided with this timeframe.

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