

“Nothing-Works” or “Something-Works?” Gang-Crimes and Interventions in the Print Media

by

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Abstract

A recent study has revealed that gang-related research has become one of the most popular topics in criminal justice disciplines (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015). However, fruitful information from academic studies is not fully utilized by either official institutions or the mass media. Previous studies have concluded that newspaper reports contribute to the creation of myths about gangs (Howell, 2007; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). The current study reexamines this conclusion by systematically analyzing 180 newspaper reports drawn from LexisNexis, focusing on gang-related crime and interventions. The findings show that newspaper reports do create “myths” about gangs, but not in the same manner that researchers once believed. We also find that researchers may benefit from newspaper reports because they often rapidly capture social phenomena and can provide information on topics for future academic research.

INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that gang-related research has become one of the popular topics in the criminal justice and criminology disciplines. Pyrooz and Mitchell (2015) identified 4,992 contributions related to gangs as of the end of 2013. However, this information is not fully utilized by official institutions or the mass media. For example, only 15 states have statutes which define a gang member (Barrows & Huff, 2009). Besides official institutions, the public does not benefit from these fruitful findings either; on the contrary, myths/misrepresentations about gangs are provided to the public by both newspapers and other forms of the mass media (see Decker, 2002;¹ Howell, 2007; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Buckler, Griffin,

and Travis (2008) explained this phenomenon by arguing that mass media primarily rely on official sources (e.g., police departments, correctional institutions) and seldom cite academic and scholarly sources. This is not to suggest that official data is incorrect or mythical in nature. This phenomenon may simply be the result of a lack of translational research between official data and academic studies.

According to theoretical models regarding the fear of gangs, indirect victimization through the media and stories told by friends and family are significantly related to the fear of gangs (e.g., Katz, Webb, & Armstrong, 2003; Lane, 2002). A large portion of indirect victimization can be attributed to media portrayals of gangs and have a massive influence on public perceptions of gangs. Hence, studying gang-related print media reports can partially infer the public's perceptions of gangs.² Public perception, in turn, influences punitiveness (see Brace & Boyea, 2008)—gang members receive harsher punishment than non-gang members because gang membership increases the public's fear of crime. In addition, many studies have shown that crime news has priority in the mass media (e.g., Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Thompson, Young, & Burns, 2000). Therefore, the mass media, including print media, have a responsibility to provide reliable gang-related information to the public.

Researchers have engaged in a debate over the mass media's ability to deliver accurate information to the public. Some researchers stated that information provided by media reports is reliable, and it can be incorporated in academe (e.g., Chaudhuri, 2012; Jensen & Thibodeaux, 2013). In contrast, some researchers question the reliability of the mass media (e.g., Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Frost & Phillips, 2011; Howell, 2007). By focusing on gang-related crime and gang-related intervention, the current study reexamines previous conclusions, addressing two research questions: (1) what information do gang-related newspaper reports try to deliver regarding gang-related crime and interventions? (2) Does this information contribute to misrepresentations/myths about gang-related crime and interventions? The study begins by reviewing top-rated academic articles that examine gang-related crime and interventions. The analytical section discusses the application of the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to explore general themes among 180 newspaper articles drawn from the LexisNexis database. The discussion section summarizes the findings from the study and proposes some implications for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is well known that the mass media are selective in the incidents that they report. The discretion of selecting both incidents and content frequently receives criticism from academe. For example, violent crimes such as murder, robbery, and aggravated assault constitute 90 percent of television crimes (Surette, 2015). Murder accounts for approximately 25 percent of television crimes while the FBI Crime Index reports that it accounts for less than 1 percent of index crimes (Surette, 2015). Scholars also criticize the way that mass media presents these incidents. For instance, Frost and Phillips (2011) analyzed crime reporting on cable news channels and discovered that academic experts and criminologists rarely appeared on cable news and those who did appear seldom mentioned

crime control. Some scholars, however, argue that academe may benefit from the mass media. For example, Chaudhuri (2012) compared academic and media reports on male victims in intimate relationships and argued that “the media-academic partnership can be promising in providing a fuller understanding” (p. 57).

In terms of gang-related incidents, there are also two attitudes toward information presented by the mass media. Some scholars believe that the mass media can provide reliable gang-related information to the public. For example, Jensen and Thibodeaux (2013) used the LexisNexis database to collect media coverage on gang-related news from 1980 to 2010 and compared its trend to the FBI youth gang homicide data and the National Youth Gang Survey. Their study discovered a high correlation between gang-related news and FBI youth gang homicide data (Jensen & Thibodeaux, 2013). Some scholars, on the contrary, argue that the mass media are responsible for creating myths of gangs. For instance, Howell (2007) applied a considerable amount of empirical studies to discuss how the realities of youth gangs were different from myths that might be adopted by the mass media.

These studies are mainly centered on broad analyses of the mass media. In other words, previous studies did not systematically examine how the mass media disseminates gang-related information. In 2007, Esbensen and Tusinski searched newspaper reports on youth gangs from 1980 to 2006 in the US’s “big three” newsweeklies.³ They systematically analyzed these reports, arguing that newspaper reports created misperceptions about youth gangs and gang members as they have a “strong tendency to provide stereotypical depictions of gangs and gang members that promote misperceptions about youth gangs, their members, and their group characteristics” (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007, p. 21). However, since they concentrated on youth gangs, their sample size is relatively small (N=34). In addition, police crackdown on gangs, which could influence (reduce or increase) public fear of gangs, was not mentioned.

In the following two sections, several gang-related studies are reviewed under the frame of gang-related crime and intervention. In doing so, findings in newspaper reports can be compared to those in academic articles. However, a universal limitation exists in terms of describing a gang—gangs are mainly a local concern. In his article, Howell (2007) cited Fredrick Thrasher’s conclusion that “no two gangs are just alike” (p. 42).⁴ Therefore, the gang-related information summarized from academic articles can only be treated as a general depiction of gangs rather than a precise description of each gang.

Gang-Related Crimes

The print media (newspapers) relate gangs to drug and violent crimes (Howell, 2007), while Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) summarized field research and argued that youth gang members were just like other adolescents during most of their daily activities. They quoted Klein’s (1995) statement that “the only thing more boring than gang life is the life of the researcher observing gang members” (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007, p. 25). However, both qualitative studies (e.g., Decker & Van Winkle, 1994; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996) and

quantitative studies (e.g., Katz, Webb, & Decker, 2005) have shown that most gang members use drugs more often than non-gang members. Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz (2014) also reviewed studies that applied both self-report and official data and concluded that there was a high rate of drug use among gang members regardless of the data sources examined.

Similar to drug use, drug dealing is also a common activity in the life of a gang member. Decker and Van Winkle (1994) found that 95% of their sample of gang members reported selling drugs; but their motivation was to gain affiliation with the gang rather than to make profits (Decker and Van Winkle, 1994, p. 596). However, only a small proportion of gangs (especially among youth gangs) have the ability to manage drug trafficking—most of the drug use and drug dealing takes place on an individual level rather than an organizational level (Howell & Gleason, 1999; Howell, 2007). Empirical studies have found that there are high organizational structure requirements (e.g., leaders, discipline, widely shared group goals) for gangs to be involved in effective drug trafficking (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Decker, Webb, & Katz, 2008). Overall, “there is variation among [street] gangs in their involvement in drug sales” (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014, p. 87).

Gang violence, especially gang-related homicide, draws a considerable amount of attention and coverage in the print media. Some empirical studies have found that gang members are more likely to be involved in violent crime. For example, using the Rochester Youth Development Study sample, Thornberry and Burch (1997) found that gangs accounted for 86% of serious offenses. Decker and Pyrooz (2010) used the data from the National Gang Center and found that the homicide rate for gang members was 100 times higher than that of the national homicide rate.⁵ These studies and others have suggested that gang members have much higher overall crime rates. Furthermore, some scholars argued that gang violence varies across cities, communities, gangs, and even within individuals from the same gang (e.g., see Howell, 1998, p. 9). Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) concluded that accurately describing gang-related crime was an important task for both the media and law enforcement.

Gang Interventions

Based on empirical studies, it is suggested that gangs are still a serious problem in the U.S., especially in urban areas (see Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Howell, 2007). This phenomenon suggests a myth about gangs described by Howell (2007) as “nothing-works-with-gangs.” However, Howell (2007) argued that some programs have proven effective in dealing with gang problems (e.g., the Chicago Gang Violence Reduction Program). Spergel and Curry (1990; 1993) identified six key strategies to respond to gang problems: community organization, social intervention, opportunities provision, suppression, organizational development and change, and prevention. If these programs were arranged chronologically, there are three stages of interventions—interventions before joining a gang (e.g., the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program), interventions while joining a gang (e.g., opportunities provision, social intervention, suppression), and interventions after leaving a gang (Also see Gravel et al., 2013).⁶

Most gang intervention programs focus on preventing youth from joining gangs. However, these programs suffer from a lack of evaluation (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014). The Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (GREAT), however, has been routinely evaluated by Esbensen and his colleagues since 1994. Recently, Esbensen et al. (2011) reported that GREAT would reduce youth's affiliation with gangs and would increase their positive affiliation with law enforcement agencies. Although there was no statistical significance shown between the experimental group and the control group in regards to delinquency, Esbensen et al. (2013) did discover post-effects on delinquency. Compared to the control group, students who finished GREAT had a 39% reduction in the odds of joining a gang after one year and a 24% reduction after four years. The question remains if this deterrence effect will last for more than four years (Esbensen et al., 2013).

Unlike interventions that take place before joining a gang which focus on youth at risk of gang membership, interventions during the process of joining a gang partially come from the community (e.g., social workers, job opportunity) and are focused on suppression. During the 1950s and 1960s, "aggressive social intervention programs" were prevalent, but their effectiveness has shown to be inconsistent (see Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014, p. 176). Additionally, job opportunity strategies were noted as being too expensive (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014). Law enforcement and state legislation are sources of suppression. Almost all of the states in the U.S. have some forms of statute regarding gangs and some have clear criteria for identifying gang members (Barrows & Huff, 2009). Gang members typically receive harsher punishments than non-gang members, and their names are registered in gang databases. Law enforcement agencies in large cities usually create gang crime units to help combat and suppress gangs. However, Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz (2014) clearly pointed out that in the current context, the most important aspect is the "absence of systematic evaluations of suppression programs" (p. 179). Recently, Braga (2015) reviewed the use of police gang units for gang suppression, arguing that deterrence strategies such as evidence-based policing have had a promising impact on gang suppression and gang control.

In terms of programs that are geared towards former gang members (intervention after leaving a gang), there is no particular program that specifically focuses on interventions after individuals leave a gang. Longitudinal research has been used to examine the lives of gang members after they have gone through certain programs to help fill in this gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of intervention programs. For instance, some researchers have examined recidivism rates by measuring other programs' long-term effects (e.g., Agopian, 1991; Esbensen et al., 2011).

CURRENT STUDY

There is more discretion in conducting a qualitative study, especially using content analysis; however, discretion also provides benefits by being able to discover information that has been neglected or omitted in quantitative research (Berg & Lune, 2011). In the current study, one of the two major research questions is to explore what information gang-

related newspaper reports attempt to deliver regarding gang-related crime and intervention. The second research question focuses on inconsistencies between the information mentioned in the newspaper reports regarding gang crimes and intervention programs, and what is discussed in academic articles that examine these same topics. We address this second question by critically examining the articles in our sample to determine if myths are actually being created by print media, or are the result of some other issue related to the presentation of the information included in the articles. A detailed description of methods is described below.

Data

The LexisNexis Academic database was used to create a sample specific to the current research questions. Jensen and Thibodeaux (2013) have suggested that LexisNexis is an appropriate source of data for addressing print media content. To locate relevant newspaper articles, “gang” was used as the keyword and was searched directly in the LexisNexis Academic newspaper search engine, resulting in a total of 953 newspaper reports as of the end of August 2014. Newspapers were selected based on the follow criteria: (1) American newspapers; (2) articles published from 2001 to 2014; and (3) newspapers ranking in the top ten in terms of the total number of gang-related articles. The first two criteria capture the country in which the print media is originated, and provides a wide range of years of publication. The third criterion was used to ensure that there would be a sufficient number of articles to be analyzed. Within these top ten newspapers, four newspaper sources (*The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *Daily News*) were chosen because they contained the highest frequency of articles that included the search term “gang” which produced a sample of 180 relevant articles for this analysis (see Appendix A).⁷ These four newspapers fall into the top 25 U.S. daily newspapers in 2014 based on their circulations (Friedman, 2014).⁸ Thus, we concluded that these 180 newspaper reports covered a broad readership and analysis of them would represent a mainstream description of gang-related affairs used by print media.

Analyses

All 180 newspaper reports were systematically analyzed by applying content analysis to seek patterns and themes (Berg & Lune, 2012). Content analysis has been widely used in analyzing gang-related materials (e.g., Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Thompson, Young, & Burns, 2000). Besides quantitative descriptive analysis, the current study also applied the grounded theory approach to investigate how newspaper reports describe gang-related affairs. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the grounded theory approach is “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (p. 24). With the grounded theory approach, the current study is able to achieve at least two goals. First, we discover how these newspaper reports describe gang-related affairs. Second, we are able to comparing themes found in the current study to previous academic

studies to explore potential differences. Microsoft Word and Excel were used to store and organize words, phrases, concepts, and themes (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Three stages of coding were applied in the current study. First, during the open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the newspaper reports were read, and memos were written. Second, during the axial coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), an inductive procedure was conducted to categorize memos and patterns into subthemes. Third, during the selective coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), two major themes related to gang-related crime and intervention were identified from subthemes.⁹ To ensure these findings were objective, two investigators coded the newspaper reports independently and had meetings to compare one to another, looking for similarities and differences.¹⁰ The content in the following results section is based on these similarities, meaning that both researchers agree that these patterns do exist in the data.

FINDINGS

Table 1 provides information on word counts and the general content of each newspaper report. Similar results of word counts were found like those in Esbensen and Tusinski's (2007) study of youth gangs in the print media.¹¹ These reports contained a wide range of word counts. For example, the minimum amount of words in *The New York Times* reports was 357, and the maximum amount was 3,340. In terms of the average number of words per report, *The New York Times* reports were relatively longer (1,274 words) while *Tampa Bay Times* and *The Washington Post* reports were similar in length (around 850 words). Moreover, *Daily News* reports usually used fewer words when reporting gang-related news (281 words) than the other newspapers. The mean word count for all of the reports was 875.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Newspaper Reports (N = 180)

Name	Number of Words			Number of Reports (%)	
	Min.	Max.	Avg.	Gang Crime	Gang Intervention
The New York Times	357	3340	1274	15 (71%)	19 (90%)
Tampa Bay Times	369	2127	829	10 (38%)	19 (73%)
Daily News	293	1652	581	16 (80%)	16 (80%)
The Washington Post	224	2270	864	64 (57%)	89 (79%)
Total	-	-	875	105 (58%)	143 (79%)

In terms of the content of the reports, the researchers systematically reviewed all of the reports and found four general themes.¹² We have chosen to focus on two of these themes in the current study (gang-related crime and gang-related intervention). Overall, 58% of the newspaper reports mentioned gang-related crime and 79% discussed gang-related intervention such as police crackdowns on gangs and community programs (See Table 1).

The following section will discuss the content of the newspaper reports in detail.

Gang-Related Crimes

Data Source

Newspaper reports gathered most of their gang-related crime information from official data. For example, an article that described crime rates would typically use terms such as “according to sheriff’s office statistics” and “according to regional gang task force” (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 07/23/2006). Also, to increase reliability in reporting, an article would also use former gang members’ statements (e.g., *The New York Times*, 04/11/2002; *The Washington Post*, 09/18/2003). Interestingly, and consistent with prior research, very few articles mentioned findings from academic studies (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 02/08/2007).

Ways of Reporting

Generally speaking, we found three ways that newspaper reports deliver gang-related crime. The first way is by describing a particular crime, usually homicide. For example, an article reported that a teenage gang member together with his gang associates killed his father (*The Washington Post*, 03/09/2008). Articles like this usually mentioned more details about the crime and the offenders. The second way is by listing some gang-related crimes briefly in the text (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 12/28/2004). Usually, reporters would mention a specific period of time and list crimes that occurred within that time period (e.g., in the past six months). The third way that gang-related crimes were discussed was by providing crime statistics (e.g., *Daily News*, 09/07/2005).

Crime Type

It has been frequently reported in academic articles that gang members get involved in drug-related behavior such as drug use and drug distribution (Decker & Van Winkle, 1994; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Katz, Webb, & Decker, 2005; Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014). However, this trend did not emerge in the current study.¹³ The nature of newspaper reports tends to cover violent crimes, especially homicide, rather than property crime or drug-related crime because they are “breaking news” stories (Surette, 2015). This finding is not unusual and validates the common phrase pertaining to headline news—if it bleeds it leads. Based on our sample, several articles reported homicides and violent crimes in extensive detail (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 03/09/2008), but none focused solely on drug-related crimes. The most common discussions of drug crimes involved short sentences that mentioned drugs together with other offenses. For example, “crimes include grand theft auto, residential burglaries, vandalism, drug sales, and drug use” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 01/01/2010). “Young people are wearing the Bloods’ colors, flashing the gang’s hand signs and

selling drugs near a community recreation center” (*The Washington Post*, 08/29/2008).

It should be noted that although drug-related crimes did not make up a great proportion of content, some reports pointed out that it is one of the most common crimes (e.g., *Tampa Bay Times*, 01/01/2010). Regardless, it is still hard for a reader to pay attention to this statement if mentions of drug crimes are surrounded by statements of violent crimes.

One interesting finding is that newspaper reports discussed a trend that has not been sufficiently studied in academic fields—gang-related crimes are changing from traditional crimes (i.e., drug-related crime, violent crime) to white collar forms of crimes:

The Crips and Bloods are also now into crimes that are not normally associated with African American street gangs, such as identity theft, Social Security fraud, credit card fraud and mortgage fraud. . . they’re also into bank robbery and prostitution. (*The Washington Post*, 08/29/2008)

Many newspaper reports paid more attention to those influential gangs such as Bloods, Crips, and MS-13 across the nation, arguing that these gangs were dangerous and usually associated with violent crimes such as homicide. Reporters would give labels to the gangs such as “the most dangerous gang in America” (MS-13) (*The New York Times*, 08/19/2007).

Reasons for Committing Crime

Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz (2014) summarized why teenagers join gangs: (1) family or peer influences; (2) looking for protection; (3) need for money or other materials; (4) belonging; and (5) other reasons. Also, Thornberry and his colleagues (1993) provided theoretical models related to delinquency involvement before, during, and after joining gangs—selection, enhancement, and facilitation.¹⁴ These statements partially explain why gang members would commit crimes. Similarly, based on our findings, we found three main reasons why a person would commit or suffer from gang-related crimes.¹⁵

The first one is related to (but not the same as) the code of the streets (Anderson, 2000). Based on newspaper reports, it is not only about “respect” and being “tough” as suggested by Anderson (2000); rather, it is about *culture*. One article wrote, “Gangs are embracing an increasingly violent popular culture” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 06/22/2012). Also, some newspaper reports pointed out that nowadays, it is easier to have access to this culture through the use of the internet where a person does not even need to be on the street to make their presence known or to recruit new members (e.g., *Daily News*, 01/20/2012; *The Washington Post*, 04/14/2013).

The second one is related to gang activities. It is no doubt that some traditional academic perspectives would emerge in newspaper reports—fighting over turf, fighting against rival gangs, and drug profits. However, one article mentioned that “[two rival gangs] have realized that it’s more profitable and healthier, to focus on business—drugs, extortion, prostitution—than avenging petty turf struggles” (*The Washington Post*, 08/01/2004).

Getting involved in gangs usually comes with some level of violence. Many reports

mentioned that to join a gang, a person should either be “beat in” or commit crimes,¹⁶ which is consistent with academic findings (see Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014, p. 67-69). For example, a gang member described getting “beat in” as “the whole crew has to punch you, kick you, stab you, and if you do it, that’s your initiation. You’re in the gang” (*Daily News*, 08/20/2002). Another article discussed committing crimes as a way of joining a gang, describing that “...the lowest-ranking members... must commit crimes to prove their allegiance to the gang. The crimes can include vandalism, robbery, and assault” (*The Washington Post*, 05/31/2007).

Both refusing to join a gang and getting out of a gang can cause violent crimes. For instance, an article reported that one victim was attacked because he refused to join MS-13 (*The Washington Post*, 08/10/2005). Another article, which focused on one ex-gang member who spent 20 years in a gang, mentioned that the only way to quit is by dying.

The gang leaders said we were all brothers, but it was a lie. They just want to use you. Once you’re in, the only way you leave is dead. They already tried to kill me twice, and if I am sent back, they will still be hunting for me. (*The Washington Post*, 05/19/2014)

Academic studies have found that the time that one spends in gangs is relatively short—around two years (see Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014, p. 72) and that leaving gangs is common, and it is not always related to violent behavior (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).¹⁷ Newspaper reports, however, neglected to mention this short period of being in a gang and focused on aggravated approaches of leaving a gang.

In addition, violent behavior, particularly homicide, was used as a method of retaliation between and within gangs. For example, an article described a homicide within MS-13:

[a MS-13 member] was killed because he had fatally stabbed a rival gang member inside the [apartment name omitted] of an MS-13 leader... Gang members were not upset about the murder but were upset that [the MS-13 member] did it inside the apartment of a gang leader. (*The Washington Post*, 10/13/2006)

Lastly, a few newspaper reports indicated that innocent people, usually bystanders, were frequent victims of gang violence (e.g., *Tampa Bay Times*, 01/14/2005; *Daily News*, 12/20/2009; *The Washington Post*, 01/25/2005). Victims were described as innocent people with no ties to gangs who were in the wrong places at the wrong times and were wearing the wrong color clothes.

Overall, newspaper reports discussed gang-related crimes by describing a particular crime, listing gang-related crimes in chronological order in the text, or providing official statistics. As mentioned earlier, drug use and drug sales have caught researchers’ attention (e.g., Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1994; Decker, Webb, & Katz, 2008; Howell & Gleason, 1999; Howell, 2007). Academic studies also discover that gang members have different attitudes toward different drugs (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). For example, some gang members pointed

out that they did not do hard drugs:

We might smoke every once in a while but no cocaine, no Primos [marijuana mixed with cocaine]. I know what that shit can do to you and if I catch anybody, [for example] like one of my boys, he used to sell dope, he turned into a smoker. I beat the piss out of that man. (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 136)

These differences (and drug-related crime), however, were not frequently seen in newspaper reports. Emphasis was typically placed on violent crime and made up a considerable proportion of these newspaper reports. In addition, newspaper reports frequently mentioned Bloods, Crips, and MS-13, and exaggerated the notion of “blood in blood out.”

Gang-Related Interventions

Based on our sample, we found very little information delivered by newspaper reports indicating that “nothing-works-with-gangs” myths labeled by Howell (2007). On the contrary, newspaper reports were more likely to report what might work better. Many articles mentioned that gang problems cannot be adequately solved by law enforcement alone.

... Not only with arrests and convictions but also with social programs. These focus on preventing teens from joining gangs as well as encouraging members to quit, by providing mentoring and job training opportunities. (*The New York Times*, 03/21/2004)

Before Joining Gangs

There were a decent amount of newspaper reports that discussed approaches and programs that help youths recognize gangs in hopes of helping them to stay out of gangs and away from gang activity. After reviewing all of the newspaper reports, we found that there are two major approaches used by gangs to recruit members. The first approach is associated with youths who do not want to join gangs. Gangs would often use intimidation to force them to join. One article cited a prevention program manager’s statement:

... The pressure to join gangs was so intense that often youngsters—fearing beatings or other reprisals—join because they feel they have no other choice... Eight out of 10 kids in a gang, they probably didn’t want to join (*The New York Times*, 10/15/2006).

The second recruiting tactic used by gangs is to provide materials to attract youths. For example, an officer said, “gang[s] trick you into thinking they will offer money, protection, excitement and a kind of family” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 10/28/2012). In addition, with the development of technology, gang members do not have to go to youths’ schools or homes to recruit them—they are able to do it via the internet (e.g., *Daily News*, 01/20/2012; *The Washington Post*, 04/14/2013).¹⁸

Newspaper reports have mentioned several methods to fight against gang

recruitment. Interestingly, we found these methods suggested by the media can be associated with routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979).¹⁹ The first one focuses on controlling motivated offenders—gang members who are responsible for gang recruitment. A few newspaper reports mentioned that people who recruited for gangs could be arrested and charged (e.g., *Tampa Bay Times*, 12/29/2010; *Daily News*, 10/01/2006; *The Washington Post*, 02/06/2004).

The second method focuses on suitable targets—youths who were at risk of being recruited by gangs. Very few articles mentioned specific prevention programs (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 01/14/2013); but they all share the same theme—law enforcement agencies should work with schools and community groups to teach students how to realize the existence of gangs and how to make good choices. One article that did mention a specific program discussed the “Class Action” program:

A large percentage of gang recruitment happens in schools. One recommendation from the task force is to add an anti-gang component to the “Class Action” program, which brings law officers into classrooms to discuss the law and personal responsibility. (*The Washington Post*, 10/28/2003)

The third method of gang prevention is related to increasing guardianship. One article cited an official’s statement that “some youths, especially young teens, end up in gangs because they have nothing to do after school and their parents work late into the night” (*The Washington Post*, 02/26/2005). Several articles that addressed gang prevention in schools mentioned the implementation of after-school programs. Sometimes, unlike “nothing-works-with-gangs” labeled by Howell (2007), many articles would have statistical information on the effectiveness of these programs. For example, one article mentioned “a 32 percent drop in youth gang activity from 2006 to 2008” (*The Washington Post*, 03/27/2009).²⁰ The general conclusion here is that newspaper reports prefer reporting on social intervention programs over law enforcement suppression efforts.

After Joining Gangs

Newspaper reports frequently mentioned gang-related cases that were solved by the police, most of which were related to gang-related homicides. While police suppression of gangs has been repeatedly discussed in the academic fields,²¹ it is not commonly seen in the newspaper reports. Among those that mentioned police suppression, a task force was frequently mentioned (e.g., *The New York Times*, 08/10/2003) together with an increase in attorneys and legislatures, which is similar to Klein’s (1996) observation.²²

It was also noted that newspaper reports are more critical about interventions applied to gangs and gang members than articles in academic fields. For example, a newspaper report questioned a city’s slow response to gangs:

By 2006, gang members were walking around downtown on sweltering summer days without shirts, flaunting their bulldog tattoos. The city had reached its boiling point, and no one was quite sure what to do about it . . .

A Fresno motorcycle officer was shot point blank by a Bulldogs gang member... Within months, the police department started Operation Bulldog, adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward the gang. (*The New York Times*, 11/09/2013)

Newspaper reports also questioned proactive approaches taken by law enforcement agencies.²³ One of the proactive approaches that was frequently criticized by newspaper reports was gang databases. For example, from August 2012 to October 2012 there were four articles that questioned law enforcement databases because an innocent person was identified as a gang member. In addition, very few articles had talked about correctional programs. Although some had information related to incarceration (e.g., *Daily News*, 04/25/2002; *New York Times*, 03/31/2012). These main purposes of these articles were not related to the incarceration of gang members.

After Leaving Gangs

In academic fields, there is no particular program mentioned by scholars that focuses on ex-gang members, although some studies did examine recidivism rates to measure a program's long-term effect (see Agopian, 1991; Esbensen et al., 2011). Interestingly, we found several newspaper articles that reported on tattoo removal programs. One article cited a police chief's statement about former gang members' tattoos: "There are a lot of people in this community that have bulldogs tattooed on their neck or face or arms who are not Bulldog gang members any longer" (*The New York Times*, 11/09/2013).

Tattoo removal may bring new self-identification to former gang members and may make it easier to find employment. An article published in 2005 described tattoo removal programs in detail (*The Washington Post*, 02/20/2005). In the article, it cited a nursing supervisor's statement about why removing tattoos are important:

The stigma of the gangs remained with these youths because they still had tattoos, which put them at risk in the community... We don't take everyone... We focus on the ones who are ready to commit, [to] take the bull by the horns, so to speak, and say, "This is not a good life for me. I want to get out." (*The Washington Post*, 02/20/2005)

So far, we have not seen any programs like this that have been systematically examined in the academic fields.²⁴ We argue that academics should also pay attention to programs focusing on post-desist measures such as the tattoo removal programs as described here. Though some argue that not all former gang members want their tattoos removed, it may still be a topic worth researching.

In sum, findings on gang-related interventions are different from Howell's (2007) "nothing-works-with-gangs" myths. Instead, "no-one-particular-approach-works-with-gangs" was discovered in the current research. Many newspaper articles reported that some intervention programs worked; at the same time, they also addressed issues on how to make these programs more effective. Though journalists are not social scientists, they consistently

pointed out that gangs are a social problem, and it should be dealt with by both the criminal justice system and the community. This perspective is consistent with some academic findings, arguing that relying on law enforcement alone cannot control gangs:

The strategy of increased and targeted suppression has not, by itself, been adequate to reduce the gang problem and return ‘control of the streets’—the goal of law enforcement agencies—to local citizens. (Spergel, 1995, p. 177)

Meanwhile, newspaper reports, however, also frequently mentioned the suppression of gangs by police and its positive effect on gang control. In fact, newspaper reports usually applied outcome evaluations on police crackdowns, which compared crime rates before and after police suppression. The outcome evaluation, obviously, is not preferred in academic research since it cannot provide information on what works and what does not work (Bachman & Schutt, 2013). However, at least to some extent, these articles made readers believe that gang issues have been addressed seriously.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Academic researchers are both supportive and skeptical about the ability of newspapers and other forms of the mass media to present credible information to the public (Chaudhuri, 2012; Jensen & Thibodeaux, 2013; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Frost & Phillips, 2011; Howell, 2007). Based on the findings of the current research, four main points emerge. First, we find that reading newspaper reports can create myths, or better yet, misrepresentations about gangs (see Howell, 2007). For example, newspaper reports tend to present more violent crimes (e.g., homicide) than other crimes (e.g., drug-related crime, gun ownership, and gun carrying), which suggests that all gangs are violent and dangerous, and primarily engage in violent crime. Newspaper reports also exaggerate the notion of “blood in blood out.” According to academic literature, most gang members actually leave gangs peacefully (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014). We are not suggesting that newspaper reports are intentionally delivering incorrect information to the public. Indeed, some gang members do experience victimization by members of their gang upon departure (Decker, 1996). We simply make the argument that newspapers are highly selective in terms of the stories they report. In turn, this selectivity (leaning towards reports of violence) creates misrepresentation or overgeneralizations regarding the types of crimes that gangs are most involved in.

Second, based on our data sources (i.e., *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *Daily News*), to some extent, myths/misrepresentations created by print media are not as common as researchers had previously thought. For example, when journalists try to report gang intervention, they usually consider efforts by both criminal justice agencies and communities. They are more likely to report “something-works-with-gangs” instead of “nothing-works-with-gangs” (see Howell, 2007). Our findings are consistent with Thompson, Young and Burns’s (2000) study of 4,445 newspaper articles that newspapers tends to report successful crime fighting events such as

arresting gang members and solving gang cases.

Third, our study discovered some valuable research topics that are not well discussed in academic literature. Although Bachman and Schutt (2013) argued that newspapers are not valid resources for research motives, several future research topics emerge based on our findings. For example, the relationship between tattoo removal programs, former gang members' internal identification, and the transition from traditional crimes associated with gangs (e.g., drugs, fighting, and shootings) to economic crimes that are not typically associated with gangs (e.g., identify theft, credit card fraud) are rather under-examined or not examined at all in most academic literature. By exploring these topics, academics may be able to fill some of these gaps in the gang literature.

Finally, we found that the vast majority of newspaper reports cite official data statistics and do not typically mention academic literature and statements made by scholars. However, there were a few newspaper reports that did cite scholars' statements and academic articles/reports (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 02/08/2007). This appears to be a clear, yet rare, effort by newspaper reporters to engage in translational research. Despite these efforts, readers were typically given information based on one case per article, which may overgeneralize that particular incident to all gangs. If the reader does not understand that the information is specific to one gang or one instance (although it may apply to more than one), this overgeneralization may lead to an increased fear of crime and victimization. The purpose of our study is not to examine this possibility; however based on previous research, this unintentional overgeneralization may exacerbate the public's fear of crime and victimization (e.g., Katz, Webb, & Armstrong, 2003; Lane, 2002).

Chaudhuri (2010) discussed the importance of establishing a media-academic partnership in order to deliver more accurate information to the public. Chaudhuri (2010) also discussed how both academics and news outlets can benefit from such a relationship. This relationship can be mutually beneficial for both scholars and media by relaying academic findings and statistics, and by providing academics with information about their sources of data, gang reduction programs, the public's responses to gang-related articles, and may provide ideas for future research endeavors. We agree with Chaudhuri (2010) in that this partnership may benefit both researchers and academics. However, we suggest that it is more important for print media reporters to engage in more translational research by discussing both the information they obtain from official data or police reports and findings from academic literature in order to present the public with a more well-rounded understanding of gangs and gang issues.

Our findings also have several implications. First, researchers should pay attention to the aspects that are responsible for creating myths instead of simply blaming every aspect of the mass media. Second, not all newspaper reports are biased. Both of these findings from the current study together suggest that perhaps overgeneralization may be misconstrued as intentional misrepresentation when in reality media portrayals of gangs may not always apply to all gangs at all times. Third, the themes discovered in the current study are confirmed by two academic researchers. We suggest that future research should also be conducted

among common people who have no academic training but may be potential subjects for studies on the fear of gangs in order to explore the public's perception of gangs presented in print media. We also suggest conducting linguistic research on word selection in newspaper reports that may lead to overgeneralizations such as "always", "every time", "usually", and "for the most part." These words may or may not have statistical relevance but might be used in the context of gang-related crime which can lead to overgeneralizing and a potential increase in fear of crime and victimization.

If media outlets engage in translational research when producing gang-related news articles, perhaps news outlets would be inclined to incorporate more scholarly knowledge and research findings into their articles which would provide, if anything, a more well-rounded understanding of these groups of individuals. Through this cooperation, scholars would also be able to learn more about the relationship between media and fear of crime, and the public could be presented with a better understanding of the reality of gangs and intervention efforts. In sum, what may "work" (in terms of accurate media portrayals) is collaboration, cooperation, and a clear and full representation of the reality of gangs in the United States using a combination of official data, anecdotal media stories, and research-based scholarly knowledge.

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APPENDIX A: DATA SELECTION PROCEDURE

Enrollment Decision on Portrayals based on Country and Year

Rank	Newspapers	Country	Total	After 2001		
				Before 2001	(includes 2001)	Enroll. Decision
1	The Washington Post	USA	178	33	145	Yes
2	The New York Times	USA	83	59	24	Yes
3	Tampa Bay Times	USA	68	41	27	Yes
4	The Press	New Zealand	42	-	-	No
5	The Gazette	Canada	38	-	-	No
6	Daily News (NY)	USA	30	9	21	Yes
7	The Evening Standard	UK	30	-	-	No
8	Standard. Co. UK	UK	27	-	-	No
9	The Toronto Star	Canada	27	-	-	No
10	The Globe and Mail	Canada	26	-	-	No

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End Notes:

¹ Decker's (2002) argument specifically pointed out that public perception toward gangs on the part of law enforcement agencies depends on popular culture such as movies and evening news.

² See (Dizard, 2000; Dowler, 2003; Jewkes, 2015; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011; Surrette, 2015) for discussions of the impact that media (including newspaper articles) has on public opinion and perceptions.

³ The "big three" newsweeklies examined in Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) are *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.

⁴ Klein and Maxson (2006) argued that there were more similarities than differences across gangs. However, since newspaper reports usually do not report comparison between two gangs, it is appropriate for us to treat every newspaper report as a report of one gang.

⁵ The percentage of homicide in all crimes is still relatively low.

⁶ Gravel et al. (2013) grouped gang control strategies into five groups: prevention, gang activity regulation, corrections-based interventions, comprehensive approaches, and holistic approaches.

⁷ The original number of qualified newspaper reports is 217. However, after systematically reviewing each report, we found 36 duplicates and one that was not related to a gang (related to political groups) bringing the total number of articles included in the study to 180.

⁸ Based on the report, the circulation of The New York Times is 1,897,890. The circulation of Daily News is 467,110. The circulation of The Washington Post is 431,521.

The circulation of The Tampa Bay Times is 299,985.

⁹ This manuscript comes from a large project of analyzing gang-related newspaper reports. We followed the procedure of conducting content analysis by using the grounded theory approach. We have discovered several subthemes and four major themes (i.e., gang and gang member definitions, gang member characteristics, gang-related crime, and gang-related intervention). The current study presents the findings of themes and subthemes for gang-related crime and intervention.

¹⁰ Before conducting data analysis, one author was well acquainted with the gang literature while the author was not. Doing so helped the authors balance “bias” and “scientific sense” suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), prior literature review may cause bias because the investigator has already known what he or she should look for. Prior literature review also gives the investigator a “scientific sense” of the topic, which may keep the investigator from straying off topic during the coding process.

¹¹ For example, Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) found that the word count range of *Newsweek* was from 237 to 3679. The word count range of *Time* was from 572 to 5264.

¹² The four themes that were discovered using the grounded theory approach were 1) gang and gang member definitions, 2) gang member characteristics, 3) gang-related crime, and 4) gang-related intervention.

¹³ We hypothesize that there might be more reports of drug-related crimes in local newspapers if drugs were perceived as being problematic in a particular location.

¹⁴ The selection model suggests that gang members already have a high delinquency involvement before they join gangs. The facilitation model indicates that gang members have a low delinquency involvement before joining gangs but gangs actually “facilitate” their delinquent behavior. The enhancement model is a blend of facilitation and selection suggesting that both individual factors and gangs have impacts on delinquency involvement (Thornberry et al., 1993).

¹⁵ We did not report detailed personal reasons here.

¹⁶ Also, a prospective gang member can “sex in”—“a female is required to have sex with one or more gang members” (*The Washington Post*, 03/28/2007). We did not discuss this in detail because there is no widespread evidence showing that “sex in” is related to sexual offenses (see Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz, 2014: 68).

¹⁷ Pyrooz and Decker (2011) described approaches of exiting gangs as hostile and non-hostile. Hostile approaches usually involve violence, while non-hostile approaches suggests that a gang member simply “walks away” (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011).

¹⁸ These articles especially pointed out gang presence on social network websites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace.

¹⁹ Cohen and Felson (1979) suggested that a crime is more likely to happen when three elements come together in time and space—motivated offender, suitable targets, and lack of guardianship.

²⁰ Many scholars would argue that these newspaper articles did not setup a good cause-and-effect relationship between a drop in gang activity and intervention programs such as after-school programs (Bachman & Schutt, 2013). This argument may be true. However, our focus here is to see whether newspaper reports would connect a drop in gang activity to intervention programs to create an image that “we are handling gangs well.” Apparently, based on our analyses, newspaper reports were more likely to point out that social intervention is more useful than police suppression.

²¹ Although Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz (2014) argued that there is not enough evaluation of suppression, most journal articles would discuss this in terms of gang intervention.

²² Klein (1996) found that more anti-gang laws, more task force officers, and more gang-specialized prosecutors were usually used to fight against gangs.

²³ Not all proactive approaches received large amounts of criticism. For example, newspaper reports liked the idea that police officers teach hospital employees, such as nurses, to identify gang-related injuries (*The New York Times*, 03/15/2009; *Daily News*, 06/18/2006).

²⁴ Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz (2014) mentioned tattoo removal programs in their book. However, there is no empirical evaluation on this kind of program.