

Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective

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A Life-Course Orientation to the Study of Gang Membership

SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS of gang research, such as the classic study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago conducted by Thrasher (1927), scholars have noted the disproportionate contribution that gang members make to the level of crime in society. Indeed, the observation that gang members, as compared with other youths, are more extensively involved in delinquency – especially serious and violent delinquency – is perhaps the most robust and consistent observation in criminological research.

This observation has been made across time, geographical and national boundaries, and methods of data collection. Observational studies indicate that gang members are heavily involved in various forms of delinquent activities. This finding has been reported in the early research of Spergel (1964), Miller (1966), and Klein (1971), as well as in more recent observational studies, such as those by Moore (1978), Horowitz (1983), Vigil (1988), Taylor (1990), Decker and Van Winkle (1996), and Hagedorn (1998). Studies that rely on official data to compare gang members and nonmembers have also found a strong association between gang membership and delinquent activity (see Cohen, 1969; Huff, 1996; Klein, Gordon, and Maxson, 1986; Klein and Maxson, 1989). Finally, survey research studies report higher rates of involvement in delinquency for gang members as compared with nonmembers. These surveys include Short and Strodbeck's (1965) study of Chicago gangs, as well as the work by Tracy (1979), Fagan, Piper, and Moore (1986), Fagan (1989, 1990), Huff (1996), and Esbensen and Winfree (1998). Moreover, there is general agreement that the relationship between gang membership and delinquency is particularly pronounced for more serious offenses and for violent offenses.

In recent years there has been an almost incredible proliferation of gangs to more and more American cities and a concomitant increase in the number of gangs and gang members in American society. Klein reports that

between 1961 and 1970 there was a 74% increase in the number of gang-involved cities, an 83% increase from 1970 to 1980, and a phenomenal 345% increase from 1980 to 1992 (Klein, 1995: 90–91). As Klein notes: “gangs are no longer a big-city problem” but have spread to cities of all sizes (1995: 96).

Curry, Ball, and Decker (1996a, 1996b) report similar results in surveys of law enforcement agencies conducted in 1991 and 1993. Curry et al. (1996a) found that 57% of all American cities had a gang problem in 1993; 87% of the cities with a population of between 150,000 and 200,000 and 89% of the cities with a population of more than 200,000 reported a gang problem.

The National Youth Gang Center (1997) conducted a series of surveys of law enforcement offices throughout the country, beginning in the mid-1990s. In 1995, near the peak of gang activity, they surveyed more than 4,000 law enforcement agencies¹ and found that over half (58%) of the responding agencies, covering all 50 states, reported youth gang problems (National Youth Gang Center, 1997). The most recent law enforcement survey found “that a total of 3,911 jurisdictions in the United States experienced gang activity in 1999, a 19 percent decline from the high of 4,824 in 1996” (Egley, 2000: 1). Gangs were reported in 66% of large cities, as well in suburbs (47%), small cities (27%), and even rural areas (18%). Despite the fact that the estimates of gang activity declined somewhat in all these categories, the 1999 survey still reveals a very substantial level of gang activity throughout the country and much higher levels than those observed 20 or 30 years ago.

All of these studies rely on surveys of law enforcement agencies and, unfortunately therefore, may share common sources of bias. For example, part of the increase in the number of cities with gangs may be due to a heightened awareness of gang problems in American society, an increased willingness of law enforcement agencies to admit to gang problems, or a tendency to identify more generic delinquency problems as “gang-related.” Nevertheless, the consistency of the results across these three independent surveys and the magnitude of the estimated increase suggest there has, indeed, been a substantial expansion of gang behavior in the recent past.

This increase is alarming for several reasons. The first is the sheer number of gangs and gang members in American society. The second is the percentage of cities that are currently experiencing gang problems; virtually all large cities, and well over half of all cities, report active gangs. The third is the rapidity of the spread of gangs throughout America; in the space of about 15 years, gangs have spread from being isolated in a relatively small number of large cities to being a regular feature of the urban landscape.

The spread of gangs throughout American society, coupled with the strong association between gang membership and serious, violent

¹ This was not a nationally representative sample of law enforcement agencies. Overall, 83% of the agencies surveyed responded.

delinquency, makes it imperative that we understand as fully as possible the role of the street gang in generating involvement in delinquency, violence, drug use, and drug selling. Doing so will add to our theoretical understanding of the causes of antisocial behavior and will provide important information for prevention and intervention policies. Although the importance of this research issue is obvious, Howell has recognized that the data, especially the longitudinal data, necessary to answer a number of fundamental questions concerning the nature, extent, and causes of gang behavior are “woefully lacking” (1994: 510).

Gangs in Developmental Perspective

The purpose of this book is to respond to at least one part of this gap in our knowledge by placing the study of gang membership in a developmental or life-course perspective. We are interested in identifying the characteristics of gang members and in examining the social and psychological forces that lead some adolescents to succumb to the lure of the gang while others manage to avoid it. We are also interested in understanding the consequences of gang membership for the developmental adjustment of gang members. Although we know that gang members are heavily involved in delinquency, especially serious and violent delinquency, we know much less about the extent to which gang membership plays a causal role in eliciting this behavior. Our analysis addresses this by trying to separate selection effects (the extent to which delinquents seek out the gang) from facilitation effects (the extent to which the gang enables the delinquent behavior of its members). We do this for a variety of criminal behaviors related to gang activity – delinquency, violence, drug use, drug selling, and gun carrying and use. As we will show in our analysis, gang membership appears to have a pronounced impact on facilitating all of these behaviors.

We are also interested in exploring the longer-term consequences of joining a street gang, a very understudied topic. Does involvement in this weakly organized but strongly deviant form of adolescent social network exact a toll on the later life course of the individual? Or, is gang membership merely a transitory adolescent phenomenon with few, if any, long-term consequences? We examine whether gang membership interferes with meeting the normal challenges of adolescent adjustment, such as completing high school, and whether it contributes to generating disorderly transitions to adult roles, such as teenage parenthood. As we document, gang membership appears to have a pernicious impact on many aspects of life-course development.

We examine these and related issues for both male and female gang members. While the pattern of the onset and duration of gang membership varies somewhat by gender, it has robust negative impacts on the life course

of adolescent girls, as it does for the life course of adolescent boys. Understanding how these patterns develop is an important issue for the expanding study of female gang members (see, e.g., Miller, 2001).

In addressing these and related questions, we adopt a somewhat different conceptual perspective and methodological approach than that found in most prior studies of gangs. We do not sample gangs and then observe their members as so many classic, observational studies do. Instead, we embed the study of gang members in an individual-based longitudinal study of antisocial behavior, the Rochester Youth Development Study. Some of the Rochester study subjects became gang members while others did not, and the gang members remained in the gang for varying lengths of time and at varying ages. By following these subjects over time – before, during, and after the period when they were gang members – we are able to place the study of gangs in a developmental perspective and address several issues that have largely been ignored in prior studies. This perspective should complement prior work on the phenomenon of street gangs and add to a fuller understanding of the ways in which gangs influence the lives of their members. In the remainder of this chapter we introduce our conceptual and methodological approaches, approaches that are more fully developed in the subsequent chapters.

Conceptual Framework

Our understanding of gangs and gang members has, in large part, been shaped by observational studies in which a researcher gains access to one or more gangs and spends a substantial period of time on the street corners with them, observing their behaviors and social relationships. These studies have been tremendously influential in informing theories of gang behavior (e.g., Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Miller, 1958), as well as gang prevention programs (e.g., Klein, 1971; Spergel, 1966). In spite of the extensive contributions made by these observational studies, they have a curiously myopic quality. Although they open broad windows into the lives of the gang members they observe, they do so for very narrow periods of time, that is to say, only during the person's period of active gang membership. These studies typically contain little, if any, information on the lives of gang members before or after their time in the gang.² As a consequence, the general literature on street gangs often fails to highlight life-course development, thereby limiting our understanding of both the antecedents and the consequences of gang membership. This book, however, adopts a life-course perspective to provide a somewhat different angle on gangs and gang members that

² There are some exceptions, for example, studies by Moore (1978, 1991), Vigil (1988), Hagedorn (1998), and Tracy (1979).

should add to the understanding of the origins and consequences of gang membership.

Life-Course Perspective

The life-course perspective emphasizes the importance of treating behavior as constantly evolving as various demands, opportunities, interests, and events impinge upon actors as they age (Baltes, 1987; Baltes and Brim, 1982). Human development is not completed in childhood or even in adolescence; indeed, behavior that is initiated in adolescence can have important consequences for transitions to adulthood, and these transitions, in turn, can shape the course of adult development. Thus, within the life-course perspective, emphasis shifts from a focus on early socialization to one on the entire life-span (Elder, 1994). Given this general orientation, Elder defines the life course as “the interweave of age-graded *trajectories* such as work careers and family pathways, that are subject to changing conditions and future options and to short-term *transitions* ranging from leaving school to retirement” (1994: 5; emphasis added).

Human development is viewed as explicitly multidimensional because people simultaneously move along different trajectories (e.g., family and school) as they age. Not everyone enters all developmental trajectories, however, and people can be characterized in terms of the pattern of trajectories they do and do not enter. Trajectories also become interlinked over time (Elder, 1994), and entrance into some trajectories can impact movement along other trajectories. For example, educational attainment can alter family and career development. Similarly, trajectories of antisocial behavior can influence a variety of conventional or prosocial trajectories like school, work, and family formation.

A central theme of the life-course perspective is that the timing of transitions into or along trajectories has real behavioral consequences. Off-age transitions, especially precocious or early transitions, can create disorder in the developmental sequence and lead to later problems of adjustment because the person is less likely to be socially and psychologically prepared for the transition. To illustrate, becoming a teenage parent can reduce the chances of completing high school and of establishing a stable employment history.

Elder (1985) also emphasized that both the timing of transitions and the interlocking nature of trajectories can create *turning points*, a redirection or change in the life course itself. A precocious transition in one trajectory that has a ripple effect into others can alter the long-term prospects of successful adjustment into adulthood. Thus, the life course is never fully determined. It is always possible for new conditions and events to coincide so as to deflect even well-established pathways.

The characteristics, behaviors, and experiences of individuals will also influence the contexts they enter and their perceptions of those contexts. In turn, the changing contexts are expected to have an impact on the individuals' characteristics and behaviors. Thus, there is an explicit recognition of bidirectional relationships between the individuals' behaviors and significant contexts in their lives (Elder and Caspi, 1988; Hetherington and Baltes, 1988; Magnusson, 1988).

In this regard, there is also increasing recognition of the importance that antisocial behavior has in generating transitions and, via those transitions, the likelihood of success in the adult years (Jessor, Donovan, and Costa, 1991; Krohn et al., 1995; Newcomb and Bentler, 1988; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Yamaguchi and Kandel, 1985a, 1985b). Adolescent antisocial behavior leads to later disorder in the life course for several reasons. Participating in illegal behaviors may distract one from conventional pursuits; for example, drug use lowers performance in school (Jessor and Jessor, 1977). Involvement in antisocial behavior may also cause the individual to be officially labeled, making participation in conventional arenas such as school and work more difficult (Farrington, 1977). In addition, participation in antisocial behavior discourages friendships with conventional others and encourages involvement in deviant social networks. Because prosocial friends, teachers, and family can play an important role in assisting the individual in getting through school, obtaining a job, and selecting a mate, the loss of these sources of social capital can have deleterious effects on later life chances.

Gangs in Life-Course Perspective

The life-course perspective has a number of implications for the study of gangs and gang members, both theoretically and methodologically. Perhaps the most basic is that gang membership itself can be thought of as a trajectory. Some people enter that trajectory while others do not. Of those who do, the transition into the gang occurs at different ages. Some experience an unusually early entry and, based on the general life-course premise that off-time transitions generate problems of adjustment, gang membership may be particularly consequential for them. It may be the case that people who join gangs at unusually late ages may experience serious problems of adjustment as well.

People who do enter the gang trajectory stay for varying periods of time and become more or less involved in the life of the gang. The gang literature demonstrates clearly that not all gang members are created equal. Many are fringe members, circling the periphery of the gang; relatively few are core members, ensnared in the center of the gang world (Klein, 1971). One would expect that deeper penetration along this trajectory – either in

terms of duration of membership or position within the gang – would yield stronger behavioral and developmental consequences.

If gang membership is conceived as a trajectory with real behavioral consequences, then it is also important to identify why some people enter it and others do not. In addressing this issue, the life-course perspective points to the importance of several sources of explanation. First, it is unlikely that the social and psychological forces that lead to gang membership are only those that are established early in the life course. The life-course perspective highlights the importance of unfolding relationships and developmental influences that are more proximal to the outcome. Second, the multidimensional nature of the model emphasizes that several domains are likely to be involved. Thus, for example, it is unlikely that the origins of gang membership are to be found only in social structural position or only in family relationships. Rather, the broader social ecology – structural position, neighborhood context, and family, school, peer, and individual characteristics – is likely to play a role. The empirical problem is to see which combination of these factors is most important for this particular outcome.

The life-course orientation also suggests that for many people gang membership may act as a turning point that has the potential to alter or redirect basic life-course pathways. In brief, these processes stem from the somewhat more formal structure and the highly deviant nature of the street gang (see Chapter 9). Gangs are social networks that embed their members in deviant routines and isolate them from prosocial arenas. To the extent to which that occurs, gang membership may serve as a turning point, redirecting the person's life. This redirection can unfold in several other behavioral domains. One is the person's delinquent or criminal career; entry into a gang ought to deflect delinquent trajectories upward. This upswing in deviant behavior need not be permanent, however; indeed, because the life-course perspective assumes that human development is always malleable, influenced by proximal events, it should not be. Thus, exit from the gang ought to deflect the delinquent or criminal career downward. The life-course perspective suggests a synchronous movement between gang membership and delinquent behavior.

The view of gang membership as a turning point also suggests consequences for other, more prosocial trajectories. Given the intensely deviant orientation of the gang, joining a gang should disrupt the normal course of adolescent development, for example, with respect to family relationships and school performance. As a result, gang members ought to be more likely to experience precocious transitions to adult roles and be less well equipped to make a successful adjustment to adulthood.

Finally, the life-course perspective suggests that the duration of gang membership ought to intensify these consequences. While emphasizing the malleable nature of human development, the life-course perspective does

not view development as endlessly malleable. The longer anyone remains on any trajectory, the harder it is to avoid its consequences, and deviant trajectories are no exception (Thornberry, 1987). Indeed, the highly deviant nature of the street gang may have particularly negative consequences, generating what Moffitt (1997) refers to as a “knifing off” from prosocial trajectories.

In sum, adopting a life-course perspective raises a number of interrelated issues for investigation. They concern the antecedents of gang membership, its short-term, contemporaneous consequences, and its longer-term developmental consequences. The research literature on gangs has addressed all of these aspects of gang membership but tends to focus on the middle portion, the period of active membership. By systematically addressing the broader array of issues identified here and by examining life-course development before, during, *and* after the period of membership, we hope to expand our understanding of this phenomenon.

Methodological Approach

The life-course orientation that we adopt also has implications for research design. Previous studies of gangs and gang members typically relied on one of two research strategies. There are many observational studies in which researchers (e.g., Hagedorn, 1998) or detached workers (e.g., Short and Strodbeck, 1965) gather detailed qualitative information about the activities of gangs and their members. Other studies are comparative quantitative analyses in which researchers sample gang members and compare their behavior and attitudes to those of nonmembers (e.g., Esbensen and Winfree, 1998; Klein et al., 1986). Some studies, of course, blend the use of quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Although these studies form the bedrock for our understanding of gang behavior, they are somewhat limited in their ability to address life-course issues. As noted, the typical gang study focuses on gang members when they are actively involved in the gang. Relatively little is known about their pre-gang characteristics, behaviors, and activities, except via retrospective data or official records. Thus, our understanding of developmental precursors is hampered by designs that sample either gangs or gang members. In turn, that limits our ability to identify risk factors for gang membership, to distinguish between the precursors and the consequences of gang membership and, therefore, to examine the more difficult issue of identifying the social forces that actually cause adolescents to join street gangs.

Previous studies of this sort are somewhat less hampered in their ability to study the postgang behavior and adjustment of gang members since, having identified gang members, they can be followed in time (e.g., Hagedorn, 1998). Nevertheless, many studies of gang members do not do so, and the gang literature has an overwhelming focus on life while in the gang. Thus,

while we have a varied and rich understanding of the contemporaneous influences of gang membership on the lives of gang members, we have much less information on its long-term consequences in altering human development and life-course trajectories. As early as 1971 Klein noted that “though the need is great there has been no careful study of gang members as they move into adult status” (1971: 136), a situation that has not changed appreciably over the past 30 years.

To address these life-course issues, it is necessary to identify a community sample of adolescents – some of whom will become gang members and some of whom will not – and trace their growth and development beginning prior to their age of joining the gangs. Doing so allows us to identify antecedent risk factors and the causal processes associated with gang membership. Following the sample during their gang-involved years allows us to gauge the contemporaneous impact of gang membership on behavior, attitudes, and social relations. Finally, by continuing to follow the sample – both gang members and nonmembers – after the peak years of gang membership, the longer-term consequences of gang membership on life-course development and adjustment can be assessed. In other words, the way in which the trajectory of gang membership relates to other trajectories – both prosocial (e.g., schooling) and antisocial (e.g., drug selling) – can be more properly studied.

This book is based on a long-term project, the Rochester Youth Development Study, that has these design features. It selected a community sample at age 13 and followed the youths until age 22, spanning the peak ages of gang involvement, at least in this study site.³ Longitudinal panel studies such as this one have both advantages and disadvantages for the study of gangs and gang members. In panel studies the *individual gang member* is the unit of analysis; in contrast, in many previous gang studies the *gang* is the unit of analysis. Among the disadvantages of panel studies is the limited ability to study group processes and the ways in which group processes influence the behaviors of gang members. This type of design also tends to decontextualize the deviant behavior of gang members and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between delinquent acts committed by gang members as individuals and delinquent acts committed by gang members for the gang, or at least in the context of gang activities. Thus, some important analytic issues cannot be easily addressed using individual panel studies.

There is also an important limitation concerning the generalizability of the findings derived from the available panel studies of gang members. Virtually all longitudinal data sets that have measured gang membership have been conducted in newer or “emergent” gang cities. In particular,

³ The design is described in detail in the next chapter.

they have been conducted in Rochester, New York (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 1993), Denver, Colorado (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993), Seattle, Washington (Battin et al., 1998), and Montreal, Canada (Lacourse et al., forthcoming). Because of this, it is not clear whether the findings of these studies are unique to emergent gang cities or whether they would be replicated if panel studies had been conducted in traditional gang cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago.

While having some distinct limitations, studies of gang members embedded within these longitudinal panel studies also have distinct advantages. They address substantive issues that cannot easily be examined when the gang is the unit of analysis. As mentioned earlier, longitudinal designs are well suited to the identification of antecedent characteristics and the estimation of time-ordered causal models. Panel studies also allow for the study of models of within-individual change, not just between-individual comparisons. These models, in which each individual serves as his or her own control, are powerful ways of examining the impact of social influences – such as gang membership – on behavior.

Overall, a developmental approach complements the very detailed understanding that prior observational and comparative research has presented about periods of active gang membership, and both types of studies are needed to understand fully the phenomenon of street gangs. By identifying areas of convergence and divergence in results – in combination with a firm understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the different designs – perhaps we can move both our knowledge of gang behavior and our efforts to prevent it forward. We return to this issue in the final chapter when we discuss the theoretical and policy implications of our findings.