

# Investigating the Roles of Socioeconomic Status, Gender, Immigrant Status, and a Psychiatric and/or Cognitive Diagnosis in Youth Gang Involvement



Natalie Sisneros; Naeri Hakopian; Ngozika Egbuonu; Victoria Boone  
Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology

## BACKGROUND

- Previous studies have concluded that gender and age (Hayward & Honegger, 2014), having a severe or specific psychological diagnosis and/or learning disorder (Coid et al, 2013), lower socioeconomic status (SES; Alleyne & Wood, 2014), and marginalization (Esbensen & Carson, 2012) play important roles in the risk factors for youth gang involvement.
- Several community and social programs have examined these themes in order to identify the ways that they can effectively combat the potential risk factors for becoming a gang member.
- However, few studies have collectively evaluated the extent to which each theme affects a young person's potential for gang involvement.
- This literature review hypothesizes that the potential to join gangs will be significantly higher as a result of being male; having a low SES; immigrant status; and whether the individual has a cognitive disorder and/or specific type of psychiatric diagnosis.

## PARTICIPANTS

- N=49 - 8934
- Age=10-21
- Ethnically-diverse with oversampling of African-American and Hispanic/Latinx populations
- Male and female participants; however majority were males

## METHODS

- This literature review utilized such methods as focus groups, questionnaires, longitudinal studies with surveys, logistic regression, and meta-analyses.
- **Measures:**
  - **Gang Risk of Entry Factors** (GREF; Hennigan et al, 2014): Was developed to identify youth who are at high risk for becoming involved in gang activities.
  - **National Longitudinal Survey of Youth** (NLSY; Tapia, 2011): Surveyed a random multistage cluster of black and hispanic youths in the United States.
    - Data collected a wide range of self reported assessments of social environments and parent self reports.
    - Studies focused on self reported new arrest and interview remarks regarding the quality of housing units where the youth lives.
  - **Gang Resistance Education and Training** (GREAT; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Osgood, 2012): a gang- and delinquency-prevention program delivered by law enforcement officers within a school setting.

## RESULTS

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics**  
**(in percentages) of Gang Youth by Gender**

	Total Sample		Gang Youth Only	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total n	2,808	3,043	380	237
Total percentage	48	52	62	38
Race				
White	42 <sup>1</sup>	40	26	22
	49 <sup>2</sup>	51	65	35
African American	26	27	33	27
	48	52	66	34
Hispanic	19	18	23	28
	49	51	56	44
Asian	6	6	4	5
	45	55	56	44
Other	7	9	14	17
	42	58	55	45

1. Column percent.  
2. Row percent.  
\*\*  $p < .01$  for total sample and for gang youth.

Esbensen et al., 1999

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics by Gang Membership**

	Full sample (n) of persons = 3,881		Gang member (n = 299)		Nongang (n = 3,582)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SES						
Interviewer rating						
Low	0.07	0.25	0.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.32	0.07	0.26
Mid	0.42	0.47	0.58 <sup>a</sup>	0.49	0.41	0.49
High	0.51	0.48	0.30 <sup>a,b</sup>	0.46	0.52	0.50
Arrested	0.05	0.22	0.27 <sup>a</sup>	0.44	0.04	0.20
Arrests	0.079	0.46	0.58 <sup>a</sup>	1.57	0.06	0.38

Tapia, 2011

- Results of this literature review confirm the hypothesis and suggest that males are more likely than females to become involved in gangs later in their adolescence; and be convicted of a violent crime.
- Additionally, females who are involved in gangs are more likely to have experienced and/or witnessed physical abuse ( $p=.006$ ) and domestic violence ( $p=.003$ ); and are more likely to participate in gang activity if they have siblings who are also involved ( $p=.01$ ).
- Moreover, in a longitudinal study of 7,615 incarcerated juveniles, 11% were in gangs with 1.77x higher rates of PTSD, 2.58x higher rates of substance use, 1.24x higher rates of ODD and 4.05x higher rates of CD.
- Collectively, the studies further support the hypothesis by indicating that coming from a lower SES background, being a marginalized immigrant, and/or having a severe psychiatric diagnosis such as Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD; 86%) or a learning disability will increase the likelihood that the child or adolescent will become involved with a gang.

## DISCUSSION

- Overall, being male; having a low SES; feeling marginalized as a result of the individual's race/ethnicity/or immigrant status; and having an ASPD diagnosis and/or learning disorder greatly contribute to the increased potential that a young person will become involved with a gang.
- Although these findings provide significance, more research should be conducted in order to better understand the way community and social programs can work against these themes in order to better meet the needs of children and adolescents who wish to avoid or discontinue gang activity.

## REFERENCES

1. Barrett, A. N. (2013). Acculturative stress and gang involvement among latinos: U.S.-born versus immigrant youth. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 35(3), 370-389.
2. Coid, J.W., Ullrich, S., Keers, R., Bebbington, P., DeStavola, B.L., Kallis, C., Yang, M., Reiss, D., Jenkins, R. & Donnelly, P. 2013. "Gang membership, violence, and psychiatric morbidity", *American journal of psychiatry*.
3. Dupéré, V., Lacourse, É., Willms, J. D., Vitaro, F., & Tremblay, R. E. (2007). Affiliation to youth gangs during adolescence: The interaction between childhood psychopathic tendencies and neighborhood disadvantage. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 35(6), 1035-1045. doi:10.1007/s10802-007-9153-0
4. Esbensen, F., Deschenes, E. P., & Winfree, L. J. (1999). Differences between gang girls and gang boys: Results from a multisite survey. *Youth & Society*, 31(1), 27-53.
5. Esbensen, F. (2012). Who are the gangsters?: An examination of the age, race/ethnicity, sex, and immigration status of self-reported gang members in a seven-city study of american youth. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 28(4), 465-481.
6. Gilman, A.B., Hill, K.G., Hawkins, J.D., Howell, J.C., & Kosterman, R. (2014). The developmental dynamics of joining a gang in adolescence: Patterns and predictors of gang membership. *Journal Of Research On Adolescence*, 24(2), 204-219. doi:10.1111/jora.12121
7. Harris, T.B.; Elkins, S.; Butler, A.; Shelton, M.; Robles, B.; Kwok, S.; Simpson, S.; Young, D.W.; Mayhew, A.; Brown, A.; Sargent, A.J. Youth Gang Members: Psychiatric Disorders and Substance Use. *Laws* 2013, 2, 392-400. doi:10.3390/laws2040392
8. Hayward, R. A., & Honegger, L. (2014). Gender differences in juvenile gang members: An exploratory study. *Journal Of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 11(4), 373-382. doi:10.1080/10911359.2014.897110
9. Hennigan, K.M., Maxson, C.L., Sloane, D.S., Kolnick, K.A., & Vindel, F. (2014). Identifying high-risk youth for secondary gang prevention. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 37(1), 104-128.
10. Hill, Karl; Lui, Christina; Hawkins, David. Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth. Office of Justice and Delinquency Prevention. December 2001
11. Madden, Vaishnav; Brodie, Colin; Hrobonova, Eva; Understanding the Mental Health <http://www.mac-uk.org/wped/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mental-Health-and-Gangs-Report-2013.pdf>
12. Sivan, A. B., Koch, L., Baier, C., & Adiga, M. (1999). Refugee youth at risk: A quest for rational policy. *Children's Services: Social Policy, Research, & Practice*, 2(3), 139-158. doi:10.1207/s15326918cs0203\_2
13. Tapia, M. (2011). U.S. juvenile arrests: Gang membership, social class, and labeling effects. *Youth & Society*, 43(4), 1407-1432. doi:10.1177/0044118X10386083
- Caputo, T., & Kelly, K. (2015). Community level factors and concerns over youth gangs in first nation communities. *Journal of Gang Research*, 22(4), 37-52.

For additional information please contact:  
poster.information@gmail.com