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UNDERSTANDING YOUTH GANG INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

Youth gang involvement has become increasingly normalized throughout the years in the United States, particularly among youth from low-income and minority communities. Within the juvenile justice system, there is a disproportionate representation of Black, Brown, and Latinx youth, which highlights the long-standing structural inequalities present in policing, sentencing, and discrimination. These disparities demonstrate that youth gang involvement cannot be understood solely as delinquency but should be examined through broader social conditions that shape opportunity, behavior, survival, and identity. Through the lens of recidivism, many youth involved in gangs are more likely to enter the justice system and repeatedly cycle through it because of the limited access to rehabilitation programs, educational opportunities, and stable community resources. Therefore, youth gang involvement represents a major conflict in the juvenile justice system because of systemic barriers, social inequality, recidivism, and the system's struggle to prioritize rehabilitation. To further analyze this issue, this paper draws on several sociological and criminological theories, including Social.

Keywords

Disorganization Theory, Strain Theory, Social Control Theory, and Differential Association Theory

Theoretical Framework

The Social Disorganization Theory, developed by Shaw and McKay, explains how communities with weak institutions, high residential mobility, poverty, and ethnic diversity often experience higher levels of crime and gang activity due to weakened social control and limited collective efficacy. Emerick et al. (2014), citing Sampson (2004), also explain that low-income communities often lack the resources needed to address issues such as crime, unemployment, and inadequate education. Because of these limitations, individuals in underrepresented communities may struggle to access opportunities that could improve their quality of life. The lack of economic and social support can make personal goals seem out of reach, reinforcing cycles of poverty and limiting upward mobility.

Additionally, Emerick et al. (2014) noted that the Latino population is considered vulnerable to both victimization and participation in serious crimes such as homicide because of factors including high poverty rates, high school dropout rates, and a younger age structure (as cited in Martinez, 2002). This connects to social disorganization because structural inequalities in low-income communities may reduce access to higher education and employment opportunities. Nonetheless, crime is not categorized by ethnicity but by the social and economic disadvantages that affect a specific group of people. These conditions make it harder for individuals to achieve long-term goals or overcome poverty in this neighborhood.

The Strain Theory, as proposed by Robert Merton, argues that youth may turn to gangs when legitimate opportunities for success are blocked, creating pressure to achieve socially valued goals through alternative means. Vowell & May (2000) stated that "delinquency is also the social mechanism to relieve frustration or pressure resulting from the inability to compete effectively with middle-class students in the school environment." In other words, students who lack access to the same educational resources, support, and financial stability may feel excluded or disadvantaged in academic environments. For example, those who struggle to meet the expectations of school or attain a job may then turn towards delinquent behavior as a way to cope with the rejection by the system and a sense of failure.

This connects to Strain Theory because it highlights how blocked opportunities and unequal access to success can push youth toward deviant behavior. It also considers that schools are unintentionally reinforcing these inequalities by failing to address the social and economic barriers faced by minority and low-income youth. Moreover, a combination of emotions like anger or depression increases the likelihood of criminal involvement through the pressure of financial strains or unmet educational goals, and other factors such as debt and lack of a degree can exacerbate this sense of unfairness (Dennison, 2022). Thus, delinquent behavior does not necessarily reflect choice; it can also respond to structural inequalities and barriers within the education system.

The Differential Association Theory, developed by Edwin Sutherland, suggests that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with peers, meaning that exposure to gang environments increases the likelihood of adopting delinquent behaviors. Zavala et al. (2019) spoke about how differential association explains why individuals with delinquent peers have a heightened risk of victimization. It also extends to whether your authority figures, such as parents or other siblings, are absent in your life, which reveals a lack of guardianship against victimization (Zavala et al., 2019). For example, students or young adults who spend less time at home and more time with their peers, many of whom may influence their routine actions.

Further, Sheila (2016) underlined that a gang is perceived as a family, and, to a certain degree, every family member is responsible for protecting its own. The gang member's duty is to protect the gang during a crisis or a gang war. Likewise, family members are expected to support, confide in, and, if necessary, protect one another, as in a gang. This perspective helps explain why gang involvement can become deeply rooted in identity and social relationships, rather than being viewed as a "criminal."

Social Control Theory focuses on how strong social bonds can discourage individuals from engaging in criminal behavior because of the value of those relationships and association with others. For example, if an individual has strong connections with family, friends, teachers, and other positive influences, they are more likely to follow societal norms and avoid delinquent behavior. In addition, involvement in extracurricular activities can strengthen a student's sense of responsibility and social belonging, thereby reducing the likelihood of criminal involvement.

Emerick et al. (2014) found that social isolation and alienation associated with concentrated disadvantage may foster the development of gangs, which could account for the strong association with concentrated disadvantage and gang-related homicide. When an individual experiences social isolation, they may want to seek acceptance and a sense of belonging through gangs. By addressing the root cause of social disorganization and isolation, communities may be able to reduce gang activity and violence while creating a safer environment for their people.

Causes of Youth Gang Involvement

Youth gang involvement has a relation between individuals who come from low-income backgrounds and face financial barriers, as well as peer pressure or a sense of belonging to a community or group. Similarly to Conquergood's theory of gang communications/performance, where gangs assert their identities as part of oppressed people, with a more popular religious belief system that became integrated into gang texts and ideologies. For instance, specific slang, graffiti, and bodily adornments are incorporated into their gang's field of representation.

Another factor can be the need for protection, especially when living in an area that has high crime and violence. When understanding youth gang involvement, those individuals are perceived as having "low self-control," and they are more prone to engaging in criminal behavior, which places them at risk for "victimization" (Zavala et al., 2019)

Zavala et al. (2019) referenced Schreck's (1999) theory of crime, gender, and victimization, where individuals with low self-control are less likely to think beforehand about their actions, which may put individuals in an undesirable situation that increases their victimization. In other words, the youth who have low self-control are less likely to change their lifestyles once they become physically victimized, and this contributes to future victimization and delinquency (Zavala et al., 2019). This is related to how gangs are structured because before entering a gang, there's a process that one has to go through, and when you want to get out, that itself is difficult.

Recidivism and Gang Affiliation

Tapia (2011) revealed that police profiling of gang youth is likely due to gang members' physical appearance cues and their associations with other known gang-involved youth (cited by Jackson & McBride, 1996; Valdez, 2000; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). This also correlates with the likelihood of increased recidivism, as gang members, whether they return to engage in criminal behavior, are often more likely to be targeted by law enforcement. To some extent, gang members may engage in criminal activity to gain status and a reputation within the gang and in their neighborhood. Tapia (2011) additionally explained that "minorities, males, and poor youth are significantly overrepresented in the gang population." This speaks to the association between race, gender, and economic status

that is interconnected with gang involvement in society.

Sheila (2016) elaborated on the subculture that includes an individual's "street codes" for surviving on the streets, their distinct use of language, and their display and practice of violence.

Additionally, a gang's street code often differs as a way to preserve its identity and distinguish itself from other gangs. Similarly, "violence and presentation of violent acts is very significant among the gaps as it not only provides them a distinct identity but also displays their authority and power, which is necessary in maintaining territory and conducting business" (Sheila, 2016).

This points out the structure of gangs, their policies, and the specific criminal behaviors they are more likely to engage in.

One can also observe how the youth of color and Latino communities have been profiled due to their living conditions, lack of resources and opportunities, and mental health programs within their neighborhood. Sheila (2016) further emphasized that "being a gang member always comes with risk: risk of injury, death, or imprisonment…Apart from this, there is always a risk of getting caught. Once caught, there will be many troubles to follow." This underlines the legal consequences that come with being involved in a gang, and the exposure to harm that can affect these individuals long-term.

Educational Inequality & Lack of Resources

Educational inequality plays a significant role in youth gang involvement and delinquency because many low-income and minority students lack access to the same educational opportunities and resources as others. The lack of financial support, academic guidance, and access to higher education can prevent individuals from pursuing long-term goals and achieving upward mobility. As a result, some youth may feel excluded from the "traditional pathway" to success, which can increase hopelessness and other pressures. For those who struggle academically or drop out of school or college, gang involvement may appear to provide quicker access to financial stability without having to deal with the years of education and financial investment that are tied to societal expectations.

Dennison (2022) also emphasized that early-life strains can increase delinquency and disrupt later positive outcomes, such as college completion. This creates a cycle of strain in adulthood that may continue to drive criminal behavior. Dennison (2022) found that dropping out of college may be associated with exposure to negative stimuli, the removal of positive stimuli, or failure to achieve valued goals, which can lead to negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or depression.

If an individual drops out of college, it can be seen as a negative event or as a recognition of failed educational goals, potentially leading to criminal behavior in response to this setback.

Dennison (2022) explained that "many college dropouts are left with the combination of debt and no degree; thus, the absence of a college credential, especially under these circumstances, may be perceived as unfair and contribute to involvement in crime." Many individuals experience pressure to pursue higher education while also facing financial burden and educational systems that may not fully support their personal or economic needs.

Moreover, substance abuse stemming from social conformity and social expectations may further contribute to deviant behavior. When individuals struggle to meet societal expectations and lack access to opportunities, they may seek alternative methods. Therefore, expanding access to educational resources, mentorship, and other programs may help make higher education more accessible to all by fostering long-term success and reducing socioeconomic disparities.

Juvenile Justice System Reform

One of the most important efforts to reduce racial disparities in the juvenile and criminal justice system is recognizing and normalizing normal adolescent behavior rather than criminalizing it. In many schools, students are expected to strictly follow and enforce the rules as a matter of routine. However, some of these disciplinary policies are overly harsh and punish behaviors that are common during adolescence. Instead of addressing these behaviors through counseling, mentorship, or restorative practices, schools often rely on suspensions, expulsions, or sending students to a school-to-prison pipeline. These responses can negatively affect students' educational experiences and increase their contact with the juvenile justice system.

As a result, the minority youth who become involved in gangs often come from communities with limited access to rehabilitation programs, mental health services, or mentorship opportunities. Without adequate community resources and support systems, these young individuals may seek belonging, protection, or financial stability elsewhere, including through gang involvement. Therefore, expanding access to community-based programs, educational support, and rehabilitation services within underserved neighborhoods could help reduce youth involvement in gangs and decrease these racial disparities within the juvenile justice system. In all these cases, when individuals struggle to meet societal expectations, they may turn to alternative, often deviant, paths to success. By equipping students with the necessary tools, these programs can make higher education more

accessible, encouraging long-term success and reducing socioeconomic disparities.

Real-Life Application

Some young people become involved in gangs largely because of the environments in which they are raised. Most importantly, many of them did not choose their destiny; instead, their destiny chose them. Many youth have limited control over the neighborhoods and social conditions that shape their lives. For example, growing up in a community where gangs are highly present can make gang involvement seem like a necessary means of survival and acceptance. Others may view the formation of these youth gang groups as a substitute for family and support systems. Gangs offer power, status, attention from others, and oftentimes a strong sense of masculine or feminine identity. As a result, these factors can make gang membership more appealing to some youth who are searching for recognition, identity, and protection. However, these behaviors reinforce how law enforcement and society often define gangs as groups associated with crime and criminality.

In a way, understanding gangs requires examining the social environments and lived experiences that shape an individual's daily reality. An individual living in a constant state of survival and financial insecurity can create intense emotional and psychological pressure, especially for young individuals who may already feel they are not on the "right path." For example, hopelessness, frustration, fear, and desperation can shape how youth view their future and the decisions they make to cope with their circumstances.

Consequently, the youth who are involved in gangs are prone to believe that their relationships, behaviors, and decisions are shaped more by necessity. Likewise, individuals may no longer have to constantly worry about not having enough money to survive or live comfortably. Instead, they may begin to view financial stability as an important part of achieving a better quality of life. For some youth, gangs may seem like one of the few accessible ways to escape poverty and avoid living in a constant state of uncertainty. Furthermore, an individual who has experienced too much violence and abuse, including a loss of loved ones within their neighborhood, shows how unsafe and unpredictable one's environment can be. Witnessing this type of trauma at a young age may normalize fear due to the lack of protection.

Conclusion

Youth gang involvement among juveniles reflects a much deeper social issue within the U.S., rather than simply labeling delinquency. The overrepresentation of Black, Brown, and Latinx youth in the juvenile justice system demonstrates how poverty, discrimination, limited educational opportunities, and unequal community resources continue to shape the experiences of marginalized groups. Gang involvement has been linked to survival, belonging, identity, and protection in environments with limited opportunities and support systems.

This paper examined several causes of youth gang involvement and their real-world implications, as a means of raising awareness and support for those who are most vulnerable. It also integrates theoretical perspectives such as Social Disorganization Theory, Strain Theory, Differential Association Theory, and Social Bond Theory, which help explain how structural inequalities and social environments increase the likelihood of gang affiliation and delinquent behavior. Many youth are influenced by their surroundings and social relationships, especially when they know that a gang can provide acceptance and financial opportunities they cannot find elsewhere.

The impact of gang involvement extends beyond criminal behavior, but it also affects individuals, families, schools, and their communities. Underrepresented youth pose a higher risk of violence, victimization, and recidivism compared to others. In addition, racial profiling and harsh disciplinary practices often increase contact between minority youth and the juvenile justice system.

Juvenile justice reform must come from the outside through interventions that focus on rehabilitation, mentorship, mental health support, educational opportunities, and community-based programs. The time and effort invested in strengthening the family support system play a significant role, as they allow greater reliance on guidance and encouragement to become better versions of themselves. Restorative justice practices can also help youth build stronger social bonds and reduce the need to be part of a gang for identity and status.

Overall, reforming juvenile justice approaches is essential to addressing youth gang involvement in a meaningful and lasting way. When an individual treats vulnerable youth through punishment, it fails to recognize the structural conditions that contribute to gang
affiliation. More research is needed on policies and interventions that prioritize prevention, rehabilitation, and community-based support for youth.

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