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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 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 due to the limited access to rehabilitation programs, educational opportunities, and stable community resources. Youth gang involvement underscores broader challenges within the juvenile justice system, particularly regarding racial disparities, socioeconomic inequalities, and the need for more effective approaches to youth rehabilitation. Despite this recognition, a gap persists in the literature regarding how systemic barriers can influence the relationship between gang membership and repeated contact with the justice system. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the complex interplay among gang affiliation, recidivism, and structural disadvantages. The following research question will be addressed: How does exposure to systemic social and economic disadvantages mediate the relationship between gang membership and recidivism in the juvenile justice system? To further analyze this issue, this paper also draws on several sociological and criminological theories, including the Social Disorganization Theory, Strain Theory, and Differential Association Theory.

Keywords

Juvenile Delinquency, Recidivism, Structural Barriers, Systemic Inequality

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. Low-income communities often lack the resources needed to address issues such as crime, unemployment, and inadequate education (Emerick et al., 2014, as cited in Sampson, 2004). While race or ethnicity holds no direct connection with crime, ignoring this variable would result in incomplete criminological work (Emerick et al., 2014, as cited in Sampson and Bean, 2006). Because of these limitations, individuals in underrepresented communities may struggle to access opportunities that could improve their quality of life. The concept of collective efficacy clarifies why some disadvantaged communities can maintain effective informal social control despite limited resources. As a result, limited economic and social support can make personal goals appear unattainable, perpetuating cycles of poverty and restricting opportunities for upward mobility.

Emerick et al., (2014) also observed that the Latino population is particularly vulnerable to both victimization and involvement in serious crimes, such as homicide, due to factors like poverty rates, elevated high school dropout rates, and a younger age structure (citing Martinez, 2002). This phenomenon is consistent with the social disorganization theory, which posits that structural inequalities in low-income communities restrict access to higher education and employment opportunities. It is critical to recognize that crime is not inherently linked to ethnicity but is shaped by the social and economic disadvantages that disproportionately affect specific populations. Such adverse conditions significantly hinder individuals' ability to achieve long-term objectives and to transcend the persistent cycle of poverty within these neighborhoods.

The Strain Theory, proposed by Robert Merton, suggests that when legitimate means of achieving socially valued goals are inaccessible, youth may experience pressure to seek alternative routes, oftentimes leading to gang

involvement. Building on this perspective, Vowell and May (2000) argued 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." This insight underscores the reasoning behind students who lack access to adequate educational resources, support, or financial stability may often feel excluded or disadvantaged within academic contexts. Consequently, those students are unable to meet school expectations or obtain employment, which may be influenced toward delinquent behavior as a means of coping with systemic rejection and a sense of failure.

Given the applicability of the strain theory, it illustrates how limited opportunities and unequal access to success can drive youth toward deviant behavior. Furthermore, schools may unintentionally reinforce these inequalities by failing to address the social and economic barriers that minority and low-income students face. A combination of emotional responses, such as anger and depression, can further increase the likelihood of criminal involvement, especially when compounded by financial pressures or unmet educational goals; additional factors like debt and lack of a degree can exacerbate this sense of unfairness (Dennison, 2022). It follows that delinquent behavior among youth should not be viewed merely as a matter of personal choice; it can also be a response to structural inequalities and systemic barriers within the educational environment.

The Differential Association Theory, developed by Edwin Sutherland, puts forward that criminal behavior is acquired through social interaction with peers; consequently, frequent exposure to gang environments substantially increases the probability of adopting delinquent behaviors. Zavala et al. (2019) further illustrated the relevance of the differential association theory by explaining how involvement with delinquent peers increase individuals' exposure to criminal environments and heightens their vulnerability to victimization. Particularly, the differential association theory extends to the presence or absence of authority figures, such as parents or siblings, noting that a lack of guardianship can increase vulnerability to victimization (Zavala et al., 2019). For instance, students or young adults who spend less time at home and more time with their peers may be more susceptible to negative influences that shape their daily routines and behaviors.

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. In times of crisis or gang conflict, these members of the gang are expected to defend their own people, mirroring the expectations within traditional families, where individuals provide mutual support, trust, and protection. This perspective sheds light on how gang involvement can become deeply embedded in an individual's identity and social relationships, positioning it as more than just a criminal affiliation.

The Social Control Theory focuses on the role of strong social bonds in deterring individuals from engaging in criminal behavior, which highlights the importance of meaningful relationships and social associations. For example, individuals who maintain close connections with family, friends, teachers, and other positive influences are more inclined to adhere to societal norms and are less likely to participate in delinquent activities. Furthermore, active involvement in extracurricular activities can enhance a student's sense of responsibility and belonging within the community, thereby reducing the risk of criminal involvement. However, Zavala et al. (2019) observed that males were more likely to carry weapons, whereas females were perceived to be weak and less likely to fight back. Therefore, girls who were likely to associate with pro-social peers may have been viewed as easy targets and, thus believed to be at greater risk for victimization (Zavala et al., 2019, as cited in Cobbina, Miller, and Brunson, 2008). While also noting that boys who reported high levels of parental monitoring were less likely to report violent victimization, which suggests that parental oversight can play a protective role in reducing the risk of violence among adolescent boys (Zavala et al., 2019).

Bringing these theories with one another allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of gang involvement among youth. The social disorganization theory notes how persistent poverty, unstable housing, and fragile community institutions can erode the social fabric, leaving neighborhoods vulnerable to the rise of gangs. The strain theory builds on this notion by focusing on the emotional toll that blocked opportunities and systemic inequalities can have on young individuals. The differential association theory shifts the focus to the influence of relationships, thereby showing how close ties with delinquent peers and lack of positive adult guidance can normalize criminal behavior and promote gang membership to be more appealing. In environments where family or community support is absent, gangs may fill that void, offering acceptance and identity. Notably, the social control theory underscores the protective power of strong bonds with family, teachers, and mentors; these connections foster a sense of responsibility and belonging that can steer youth away from delinquency. When these relationships are weakened, the likelihood of engaging in criminal activity increases. Altogether, these theories provide a well-rounded and insightful perspective on the various complex factors that motivate youth gang involvement and suggests where interventions may be most effective.

Racial Disparities and Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Tapia's (2011) NLSY97[1] analysis demonstrated that gang-involved youth living in high-socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods may experience heightened surveillance from neighbors and police. This increased scrutiny can raise their risk of arrest, which underscores that complex interplay between racial and involvement with the justice system. In a complementary study, Emerick et al. (2014) examined juvenile justice data from El Paso, Texas, utilizing records from the El Paso Police Department. Their findings revealed that Latino youth constituted the majority of offenders (63.3 percent), followed by whites, (20.7 percent) and African Americans (8.2 percent). Emerick et al., (2014) noted that males predominated among both victims (74 percent) and offenders (85.3 percent). Emerick et al., (2014) pointed out that Latinos are frequently categorized as white in criminal and social statistics, which complicates efforts to accurately assess racial and ethnic disparities.

Emerick et al., (2014) further argued that the Latino population is particularly vulnerable to both victimization and participation in serious offenses such as homicide, a vulnerability linked to high poverty rates, elevated high school dropout rates, and a predominantly young age structure (as cited in Martinez, 2002). Additionally, Emerick et al., (2014) revealed that the Latino populations are often residentially segregated into urban areas that are overcrowded, underserved, and considered undesirable (as cited in Vigil, 2002) which exacerbates their exposure to risk factors for justice-system involvement.

These distinct disparities in gang involvement, disparities in victimization, and disparities in police contact underline that these individual actions are heavily influenced by the social and geographic environments in which youth reside. As stated, in higher-SES neighborhoods, where gang-involved youth may be more visible or perceived as out of place, intensified scrutiny by both neighbors and law enforcement can amplify their exposure to police contact and increase the likelihood of arrest. Most importantly, this data suggests that racial and ethnic disparities in justice-system outcomes may be perpetuated not just be differential offending, but by differences in surveillance, reporting, and institutional responses that are themselves shaped by socioeconomic context.

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 in Jackson & McBride, 1996; Valdez, 2000; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). This practice influences patterns of police profiling of gang youth and its correlation with heightened rates of recidivism, as individuals identified as gang members are more likely to be targeted by police regardless of their current behavior. More specifically, it is the gang members' dress code, demeanor, and other symbolic cues that are also consistent with street gang subculture (Tapia, 2011, as cited in Elliot, Wilson, Huizinga, Sampson & Rankin, 1996; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998).

Sheila (2016) provides further insight into gang subculture, emphasizing the importance of "street codes" for survival, distinctive language, and the ritualized display of violence. These codes not only help establish a gang's unique identity but also serve as a mechanism for demonstrating authority and maintaining territorial control. Despite gang members being involved in gang culture, Sheila (2016) noted that many expressed a desire to keep their families separate from their gang-related activities as a form of prioritizing their family's safety. This recognition highlights the serious legal risks and long-term exposure to harm associated with gang involvement, reinforcing why many gang members place such as high value on safeguarding their families.

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"

[1] The NLSY97 defines a *gang* as "a group that hangs out together, wears gang colors or clothes, has set clear boundaries of its territory or turf, and protects its members and turf against other rival gangs through fighting or threats" (Tapia, 2011).

to success, which can increase hopelessness and other pressures.

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 (Dennison, 2022). In other words, 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). Consequently, for those who 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. Sheila (2016) concurs with this perspective, noting that for many gang members, gangsterism becomes a lifetime occupation. Significantly, Dennison (2022) further 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."

Early-life strains can increase delinquency and disrupt later positive outcomes, such as college completion (Dennison, 2022). This creates a cycle of strain in adulthood that may continue to drive criminal behavior. Notably, individuals who experience pressure to pursue higher education may also be facing financial burden elsewhere, and educational systems may not fully support their personal or economic needs. As reflected, average student debt among undergraduates has soared to roughly $7,000 each year while enrolled, and over 60 percent of students require some loan aid during their postsecondary tenure (Dennison, 2022, as cited in NCES, 2019c).

While financial and educational challenges may heighten the risk of youth gang involvement, it is equally significant to recognize and strengthen the protective factors that help mitigate these risks. For instance, supportive families, positive peer networks, access to effective mentorship, and meaningful community engagement can serve as important factors against the pressures that lead some young individuals toward delinquency and gang activity. Zavala et al. (2019) underscores the profound influence peer groups can have on behavior, explaining that when a youth's social group participates in criminal activity, the individual is likely to learn and adopt these behaviors through observation and imitation. The effect of peer influence can be so robust that even brief interactions with individuals who normalize or justify deviant acts can increase the likelihood of engaging in similar behaviors (Zavala et al., 2019, as cited in Paternoster et al., 2013). However, this result is not merely on the presence of delinquent peers that shapes outcomes such as victimization, but rather the type of peers and friendship characteristics that are most significant (Zavala et al., 2019, as cited in Schreck, Stewart, and Fisher 2004; also see Haynie, 2001).

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.

In terms of recommendations for juvenile justice reform, there is a need for a multi-disciplinary approach that includes school-based interventions, family support, and community mentorship that can address different stages of gang involvement and justice system contact. School-based interventions can enable college retention by allowing postsecondary institutions to focus on streamlining the re-enrollment process of college "stop-outs" (i.e., college dropouts who seek to re-enroll at a later date) in order for former students to quickly get back on track towards completing their degree (Dennison, 2022, as cited in Bäckman, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2014).

This recommendation is aligned with strain theory, as juvenile justice interventions should prioritize financial support and mental health services to address the pressures associated with early-life adversity and unmet educational and economic goals. Providing rehabilitation and mental health support may also help juveniles navigate negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and depression, that can result from experiences of strain. Similarly, the social disorganization theory highlights the critical role of fostering a sense of community within educational settings. By

providing students with more access to supportive figures, such as guidance counselors or teachers acting as mentors, schools can help fill the gaps present in neighborhoods with weak social networks. Strengthening these relationships within the school environment offers students greater stability, which can counteract the effects of community disorganization and reduce the risk of gang involvement.

From the perspective of the differential association theory, interventions should be centered around positive peer and mentor relationships to provide juveniles with positive social influences, rather than delinquent associations. These relationships will help reduce exposure to behaviors and attitudes that reinforce delinquency. Lastly, the social control theory will underscore the importance of strengthening the juveniles' bonds with family, school, and community throughout rehabilitation and the reentry process.

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 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 Control 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.

Ultimately, 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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