ARTICLE

LIFE-COURSE EVENTS, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND THE EMERGENCE OF VIOLENCE AMONG FEMALE GANG MEMBERS

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Using data gathered from a multi-year field study, this article identifies specific life-course events shared by gang-affiliated women. Gangs emerge as a cultural adaptation or pro-social community response to poverty and racial isolation. Through the use of a social-network approach, data show that violence dramatically increases in the period between gang affiliation and first pregnancy and decreases with pregnancy and childbirth. Policy recommendations addressing the delivery of services are offered within the context of gang women's personal networks. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

This article defines the social context of violence among women's youth gangs in a poor, black community in Champaign, Illinois. Locals call this area the "North End." There is a rich literature on gang definitions (see, for example, Ball & Curry, 1995). The term *gang* has become nearly synonymous with drugs and violence. A majority of definitions use crime as the critical feature distinguishing gang from non-gang behavior. The idea that a gang is a social group that facilitates violence and other types of illegal behavior is axiomatic in criminological literature. Gang research has recently shown, however, that (a) gang-affiliated adolescents do not necessarily commit crime,

The current study was funded by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (grant 2000-JR-VX-0006).
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JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 32, No. 5, 607–622 (2004)
Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com). DOI: 10.1002/jcop.20022

(b) crime committed by gang members may not exceed in severity and frequency than crime committed by adolescents who do not report a gang affiliation, and (c) gang affiliation may have little effect on the motivation, cause, or conditions of, or for, crime (Howell, 2000; Howell & Decker, 1999). Then too, such a crime-based definition does not explain the community etiology of gangs.

Our goal in this article is to illustrate that women's gangs and gang violence on the North End are not idiosyncratic, either as individual or group behavior, nor are they the effect of local disorganization. Rather, our purpose is to identify specific life-course events the North End's gang-affiliated young women share and illustrate the interplay between those individual-level life-course events and gangs as a pro-social community response to entrenched poverty and racial isolation. We argue that poverty and racial isolation over the past 80-some years of history on the North End has effected a cultural adaptation we now classify as community-wide gangs. Our pursuit is to understand North-End women's gangs as they are integrated into North-End community culture. We will argue that within the cultural context of the North End, conceptualization of women's gangs simply as social groups whose members commit crime limits the interpretation of the complex social phenomena we know as community gangs.

Even after decades of gang research, the social mechanisms of gang dynamics (that is, how members influence one another from hour to hour, day to day) remain unclear, but we do have an aggregate description of criminal behavior and socio-psychological characteristics shared uniquely by adolescent gang members versus non-gang members (Fleisher, 2002). It could be argued that, clearly, gang affiliation alone leads to more violence and the termination of gang activity reduces violence. We contend that gang affiliation itself is too ambiguous to account for individual-level behavior shifts. Rather, it is the expansion of female gang members' ego-gang networks—the "total set of social relations of a gang member" (Fleisher, 2001, p. 203)—that has a direct influence on a full range of criminal and non-criminal behavior. Our ego-gang network data show that an increased number of older males (likewise, multiple relations to those males) provide the window of opportunity to commit (more or less, minor to serious) violence. Furthermore, we argue that a reduction in the number of males, as well as other ego-gang network changes, effect a crime reduction. Our social-network approach to gangs focuses on the individuals and their shifting social context through time as the basis for increases and decreases in crime. These contextual shifts occur as female gang members move over a course of life events typical for mid-teen to young-adult gang females on the North End. The central objective of this article is to identify and discuss these life-course events, the effect these life events have on female gang members' social life (and vice versa), and how social life changes are linked to reduction in crime behavior.

In this article, we will focus on the life course of female gang members and illustrate the cultural and social structural context of gang violence. Our data show that three key cultural events create the social context of violence. These events are teenage girls' independence from their households, gang affiliation, and first pregnancy. Also influencing the period of violence are shared early life family experiences, including childhood physical and emotional trauma (such as sexual abuse), parental drug and alcohol abuse, parental crime, and the witnessing of domestic and neighborhood violence (Fleisher, 2002; Miller, 2001). Our data show that violence dramatically increased in the period between gang affiliation and first pregnancy and decreased with pregnancy and childbirth.

CURRENT STUDY

A multi-year field study was conducted to understand women's gangs as social capital based on the assumption that gangs have a pro-social, as well as a potential antisocial, function in a community. Three types of data were collected: personal social-network data; self-report individual gang member data; and self-report public health/sex survey data. A complete data set was obtained on 74 gang women (see Fleisher, 2002, for a complete description of field methods and data).

Five years of prior field research on the North End on other federally funded projects led to the observation that North-End gangs, especially women's gangs, have more pro-social than antisocial functions. For instance, cohorts of gang friends do not commit crime continuously day after day. In fact, self-report data on intra-community social and instrumental support relations, and observations of daily behavior showed that crime, such as drug selling, when it does occur—and it may occur infrequently, or occur over a few weeks and stop—occupies little time each day. A set of gang friends may spend 10 times more time each day watching television or riding around together than all of them spend doing illegal things.

This research used the term "gang women" to refer to the category of adolescent, young-adult, and adult women who asserted membership in one of the North-End's three highest-membership gangs, the Gangster Disciples (GD), Vice Lords (VL), and Black P-Stones (Stones). An active gang member is an adolescent girl or young adult woman who identifies herself as spending a lot of time on the street hanging with gang members. Hanging around the street signals gang affiliation and symbolizes a lifestyle shift. Many gang women said that spending more time on the street and less time at home and school caused (or increased) a rift between her and her mother. That conflict leads to more time away from home. Time on the street may or may not include the commission of crime. On the North End, a girl can be a gang member and never commit a crime. Time (a lot of time on the street vs. a little time), location (street vs. school or family houses), and degree of interaction (time spent with other gang members) are key elements in gang members' (emic) concept (cf. Fleisher, 1998, p. 271; Vigil & Long, 1990) of what it means to be an active gang member. An inactive gang member spends little or no time hanging on the street, preferring to spend time at home, and reduces her number of friends acquired in the active gang phase. In no case did an inactive gang member say she "quit the gang," meaning she abandoned her claim to be a gang member and severed relations to long-term gang friends. It seems, then, that quitting the gang means spending less time on the street and more time with a smaller cohort of good friends.

The North End

Champaign's poor, black North End has a poorly documented history. Most research on southern black migration focuses on northern cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland. There are no published historical sources on black migration to Champaign. Local residents on the North End say that the reason blacks are in Champaign is because their ancestors could not read, and when the St. Louis-to-Chicago train stopped in Champaign, they saw "Ch . . ." and thought they were in Chicago. Census data are marginally helpful in the history of the North end. Prior to 1960, there are no census tract data, leaving only a general idea of how the black population increased,

but no data on where blacks resided. Some informants in this study have grandmothers and/or aunts who own homes on the North End, which were purchased in the 1950s and 1960s. Home purchases require employment; where these people worked, their incomes, and other details of social and economic lives are unknown.

The culture of the North-End black community, with its some 2500 residents, has been emerging over decades and adapting to economic and social life on the margin of white society (see Bourgois, 1995, p. 260). The North End is a socially well-integrated community with a cultural identity. Poverty describes the North End's economic and physical conditions, but North-End social life is rich in mutuality and social support. Outsiders see the black community as an area of disheveled wood-frame houses, rusted and junk cars, youngsters hanging around corners and parks, and interpret these sights through the lens of North-End gangs and drugs and violence portrayed on local media.

The North End has a history of violence and isolation. One police official said that in the mid-1970s police cruisers did not enter the North End; some North-End residents independently substantiate that claim. A now-retired school official said he needed to be escorted by local residents into the North End in the 1970s when visiting students' families. Middle-age residents reported gangs on the North End for as long as they can remember (Fleisher, 2002). A University of Illinois professor said he and others he knows were told not to drive through the North End, especially at night. University coeds reported they were warned never to stop at the single traffic signal in the center of the North End at night, lest they be pulled from their cars and raped and assaulted by gang members. Over years of research on the North End (1996–2002) in daylight, evening, and late-night hours, neither gang nor non-gang youth assaulted or attempted to assault college professors or coeds. Nevertheless, the perceived threat of gangs on community psychology for both North End and dominant community residents seems to have had a palpable effect.

North-End residents know how "outsiders" perceive them. Outsiders include whites and blacks who are not North-End residents and who are unknown to locals. Racial identity grants "nobody a free pass on the North End," said a middle-aged man, "if we don't know you, don't matter what color you are, you do not belong here." When asked why they do not leave the North End, the shared sentiment of young and old alike was the North End is home. Table 1 details the results of historical isolation in this predominantly black community.

Less than 30% of the sample reported leaving the North End to participate in social activities. Few girls (4.1%) belonged to any Champaign community organizations or groups other than those linked directly to children (informants thought of subsidized daycare centers, for example, as community organizations). Similarly, most girls (70.3%) reported never having offers of job placement services, child-care, health-care, or similar services inside their community. The seeming exception to the lack of involvement lies around church attendance: the slight majority of girls (55.4%) did report church involvement; however, more than half of the attending girls went once a month or less.

In summary, gang girls reported a stable history of poverty and community isolation. The current sample was drawn from families who felt the results of early racial bias that contributed to the formation of what is today a racially segregated, isolated portion of the main city. Do not misunderstand: the North End is not deliberately isolated by the dominant community, and North-End residents reported in an overwhelming majority that racism has not prevented them from getting (better) jobs

Table 1. Community Involvement

	Total (N = 74)	
	Number	*Percent*
Do you attend church?		
Every week	4	5.4
2–3 times a month	14	18.9
Once a month or less	23	31.1
Never	33	44.6
Do you belong to any clubs, community organizations, or volunteer groups?		
No	71	95.9
Yes	3	4.1
Over the past 3 months, how many times have you left your neighborhood to participate in social activities with people who do not reside in or near your neighborhood?		
0	52	70.3
1–3	11	14.9
4 or more	11	14.9
Has anyone in the community offered you job placement services, child care, health care for your children, or any similar type of service?		
No	52	70.3
Yes	22	29.7
Types of services utilized		
Child care	15	68.2
Other	7	31.8

or job training. Gang women claimed that responsibility. Research informants grew up together on the North End in residences, such as public-housing apartments, that were close to one another. In a real sense, gang membership represents social ties among gang women who shared childhood experiences.

Life History as a Process: The Life Cycle of an Active Gang Woman

Gang women's early-life experiences presented a bleak picture of abuse, parental crime, and fatherless homes (see Fleisher, 1995, 1998; Miller, 2001). As noted in Table 2, the majority of girls (71.6%) reported physical abuse and victimization occurring in the home. Twenty-six percent of the sample reported running away from home to get away from the beatings. Past research examining female gang membership has brought attention to the support and companionship girls feel with others who have similar victimizations (Campbell, 1984; Miller, 2001). The gang becomes a coping mechanism forming around shared abuse and other early life trauma.

Current data reveals a population of girls from families dramatically different than the middle-class nuclear ideal, adding to the existing isolation of North-End girls from mainstream Champaign. Table 2 shows that most girls grew up in single-parent homes receiving government aid. Most (67.6%) did not come from homes with matrimonial ties, and in fact, reported limited paternal involvement inside the household (3.5 years median time lived with father). The link between one-parent households and violent

Table 2. Early Family Life

	Total (N = 74)	
	Number	*Percent*
When you were coming up, did an adult ever hit you with a fist or object?		
No	21	28.4
Yes	53	71.6
Did you ever run away from home or sleep outside your home to get away from being beaten too hard or too often?		
No	55	74.3
Yes	19	25.7
Was your mom legally married to your dad when you were born?		
No	50	67.6
Yes	24	32.4
Median years lived with mother	16	
Median years lived with father	3.5	
Did you receive government aid while growing up?		
No	25	33.8
Yes	49	66.2

behavior has been supported in previous examinations (Blum et al., 2000); however, the combination of familial deficits, low-income households, and structural isolation in the community has rarely been addressed.

Intertwined with abuse and instability, most girls came from homes containing parental drug use and criminal involvement. Table 3 details parental characteristics reported by the sample.

Most girls came from homes where parents had been arrested (72.6% reported fathers' arrest and 55.4% reported mothers' arrest). A significant proportion came from homes where incarceration had occurred for one or more parents. Similarly, alcohol use was common for both mother and father, and drug use, especially marijuana, played a significant role. Girls in this sample came from families with characteristics that are known to reduce quality of life and increase the probability of gang involvement, delinquency, and other at-risk behaviors. Previous research illuminated similar backgrounds when examining male gang members. Parental criminality and drug use was found to significantly enhance youths' gang membership, drug use, and delinquency (Sirpal, 2002).

Early life occurrences form a snapshot of troubled life. It is this veil of abuse, poverty, community isolation, and parental crime that opens the door for gang membership.

Gang Membership

Gang women in the sample were active gang members at some point in their lives. To determine active gang membership, this research used the approach of self-nomination (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). If a girl said she was a Vice Lord, she was, because there was no way we could show she was not. On the other hand, we questioned what it meant in social and behavioral terms to declare oneself a gang member. When asked to cite reasons for joining a gang, Table 4 reveals that most girls (67.6%)

Table 3. Parent Drug/Crime History

	Total (N = 74)	
	Number	*Percent*
Does your mom use any of these drugs		
Weed	28	37.8
Rock cocaine	14	18.9
Heroin	4	5.4
Alcohol	42	56.8
Does your dad use any of these drugs?[a]		
Weed	26	35.1
Rock cocaine	22	29.7
Heroin	10	13.5
Alcohol	47	63.5
Has your mom ever been arrested?		
No	33	44.6
Yes	41	55.4
Number of arrests		
1	17	42.5
2	15	37.5
3 or more	8	20.0
Has your dad ever been arrested?		
No	17	27.4
Yes	45	72.6
Number of arrests?		
1	7	20.6
2	4	11.8
3 or more	23	67.6
Mom ever in prison?		
No	66	89.2
Yes	8	10.8
Dad ever in prison?[b]		
No	37	58.7
Yes	26	41.3

[a]For father's drug use, 18% did not know any of the father information for drug use, this compares to 1% for mother's drug use.
[b]For father's arrest/prison status, 15% did not know any information, compared to 0% for mother.

were not actively recruited. On the North End, the terms joining and recruiting convey a conception of what we see; that conception conveys a connotation inconsistent with local meaning. Joining and recruiting meant only that friends reached out to friends (recruiting) to spend more time together (joining). When girls joined a gang, they joined a network of friends; however, that network's composition and size changed as gang women's lives changed.

Most (85%) gang women did not report a need to join a gang for school or neighborhood protection. Most girls in this sample (71.6%) were freely allowed to talk and hang out with members of other gangs; this fact is clear in the composition of personal networks and is important when gang composition is nested within the context of the community. From the perspective of resource exploitation, to maintain strict social isolation between girls in different gangs would radically constrain access to important economic and social resources. In a community with few links to resources

Table 4. Gang Group Interactions

	Total (N = 74)	
	Number	*Percent*
Did someone actively seek to include you in your gang group?		
No	50	67.6
Yes	24	32.4
If yes, what was the relationship?		
Friend	12	50.0
Family	7	29.2
Boyfriend	2	8.3
Other	3	12.5
At what age did you first think of yourself as a member of any gang?		
10 or under	7	9.5
11–14	32	43.2
15 or over	35	47.3
Median	14	
Did you begin hanging out with your gang group because you needed that group for protection at school?		
No	63	85.1
Yes	11	14.9
Did you begin hanging out with your gang group because you needed that group for protection in your neighborhood?		
No	60	81.1
Yes	14	18.9
Did you begin hanging out with your gang group because most of your friends, close friends, and/or best friends were in the gang group?		
No	30	40.5
Yes	44	59.5
Was there a rule, spoken or unspoken, that people in your gang group were not allowed to talk to and/or hang out with people in other gang groups?		
No	53	71.6
Yes	21	28.4

outside the North End, such a cultural constraint would be nonadaptive in a resource-poor environment.

Median age for initial gang membership in this sample was 14. This was also the median age for first sexual encounter and also corresponded to the age when middle teenage girls reported they became socially, economically, and emotionally (but not necessarily residentially) independent of their household support network. Informants' mothers said that by age 14 or 15 their daughters should learn how to care for themselves. The timing of gang membership is coincident with other key life events that have an effect on personal social networks.

Gang Membership—A Network Argument

Gang research literature uniformly confirms that gang membership predicts an increase in individual-level violence. We argue that the concept of gang membership is too broad to begin to understand the interpersonal dynamics of gang members as those dynamics contrast with post-gang social processes. Our personal social-network data

go beyond the association of gangs and higher levels of violence and begin to explain individual-level processes as they operate in the personal networks of gang women.

A social network is a set of actors and a relation measured across those actors. Relations are measured and yield relational data. Relational data are contacts, ties, and attachments that relate one actor to another actor. Relations are not a property of actors, but of the systems actors create. Social-network analysis has two reference points: individual actors as they are linked to other actors; and, the network itself as an entity that exists independent of the individual actors, but as an outcome of the complexity in interactions within the social structure.

Social-network theory argues that personal networks provide opportunities and constraints on human behavior. Opportunities and constraints on active/inactive gang networks would either open new opportunities or impose constraints. As the size and composition of gang networks shift, so do the opportunities and constraints. Shift in network size and composition is influenced directly by life events. Social-exchange theory (Gouldner, 1969; Thibault & Kelly, 1959) argues that as individuals' resource needs change, network relations shift to meet new needs; this means new people are added to the personal network, others are dropped, or a combination of these, or relations to known people change. When an early teenage girl spends a goodly amount of time with friends hanging on the streets, less time at home and at school, and gets involved in criminal offending, such events alter gang network composition.

Personal Networks: Size and Composition. Active and inactive gang women have different resource needs linked to contrasting lifestyles. The mean age of active gang women is 18.8; gang network friends mean age is 20.0 ($n = 398$). The average active network size is 12.2. There is an average of six, same-gang friends per active personal network: 48.7% of the aggregate active networks are same-gang friends, 51.3% are different-gang friends. There is an average of 3.5 males per personal network; on aggregate, 29% of active gang women's networks are males. This means that nearly one-third of all friends of active gang women are men.

When young women go to the street at approximately age 14, they enter one or more gang networks whose male friends are, on average, 20 years old. If a girl is a friend in two, three, or four gang networks that have little overlap in friendships, a teenage girl may be in immediate contact with seven to 12 men; that number would increase sharply, given that each female friend would have an average of 3.5 men in each of their gang networks. Depending on the structural properties of this system of intersecting gang networks and the attributes of males (age, propensity to violence, crime involvement, psychopathology, addiction, and the like), a young girl on the street would experience different degrees of male influence. Moreover, when a young teenager first goes to the street, she may have few older female and male friends to help protect her by providing physical protection and information about which men to avoid. Linkage to men and information networks are dependent on a young teen's structural position in the street network.

The mean age of inactive gang women is 22.5; friends' mean age is 22.8 ($n = 375$). The average network size is 9.0. There is an average of 4.5 same-gang friends per inactive network: 49.4% of the aggregate inactive networks are same-gang friends, 50.6% are different-gang friends. There is an average of 1.7 males per personal network; on aggregate, 18.8% of inactive gang women's ego-gang networks are males. Inactive networks are about 25% smaller than active networks (9.0 vs 12.7 members), and have half as many males per network (1.7 vs 3.5 males). Both active and inactive

networks are composed of more than 50% different-gang friends. In both active and inactive gang networks, there are friends who have no gang affiliation.

Vulnerable Women and Male Exploitation. The time between street entry (age 14) and exit (age 17) is the window of opportunity for violence. Men in gang women's personal networks are kinsmen or step-kinsmen (some informants cited brothers or sisters as friends, some did not). Adult males in these personal networks have a continuous stream of young women to exploit, as new, young girls regularly enter street networks. On the North End, male exploitation takes the form of coercion to engage in sex and participate in drug selling with older men and women. Having a brother or stepbrother on the street does not mean he will protect his (step)sister in a case of aggression toward her. It is common to find that gang girls' boyfriends are friends of a male relative or friends of a close male friend. In either case, a male relative does not intervene in "domestic" disputes because of the relationship these males share. Gang women commonly reported that their brothers, stepbrothers, and the girlfriends of these men coerced them into drug selling and forced them to fight other girls who threatened their (males) drug selling. These sex and drug relations are exploitive in the sense that these relations are asymmetric: an adult male pushes drug involvement or sex on a (young) teenager and threatens her into compliance. If the teenager does not comply, informants said, she faces a beating, administered in some cases by a boyfriend or stepbrother.

Once on the street, 14- and 15-year-old girls are exposed to aggression, bullying (in the traditional sense of differences in sex, age, power), and coercion by adult women and men (mean age, 22 and 20, respectively). Exposure to more people means more interactions of different kinds and, in turn, the opportunity for more aggression and violence arises. Our data do not show gang-organized violence; that is, the Vice Lords plan and engage in an attack on the Gangster Disciples because the Vice Lords dislike Gangster Disciples, or the two gangs dispute ownership of drug territory (recall that ego-gang networks are composed of same- and different-gang friends). There were no drive-by shootings during the field study, but there were murders.

The most common cause of self-reported violence is jealousy. Girls tussle over one girl looking at another's boyfriend. Some girls get jealous because her past boyfriend's new girlfriend is "talking about her." This is a very common reason cited for violence as serious as the use of bat or gun, to attack either the past boyfriend or his current girlfriend: as noted in Table 5, 24.3% and 39.2% reported shooting a gun and attacking someone with a bat for reasons of jealousy.

Table 5. "Gang-Related" Violence

	Total (N = 74)	
	Number	*Percent*
Ever shoot a gun at someone		
No	56	75.7
Yes	18	24.3
Ever used a baseball bat on someone		
No	45	60.8
Yes	29	39.2

Violent Explosion

Active and inactive gang women have virtually identical early life histories. We are conceptualizing these samples using a longitudinal model, assuming that a North-End gang woman's life course passes from active to inactive stages and that our data reflect the core features of that process. The most significant difference between these stages is, first, the number of males per personal network, and, second, the size of the personal networks. Our interpretation is that active gang women's expanded personal networks with a relatively high percentage of males provide increased opportunities for criminal behavior. Table 6 details the criminal patterns in each sample. Active gang members self-reported more property, economic, and violent crime than did inactive girls.

To assess the impact of gang membership on self-reported violent behavior relative to other contextual factors, logistic regression analyses was conducted. Results presented in Table 7 show that active gang membership was the variable with the most consistent predictive ability after controlling for other contextual variables shown in previous endeavors to be important. The only other variable found to be significant was early childhood abuse.

Table 6. Self-Reported Crime in the Past 6 Months[a]

	Total (N = *74*)		*Active* (N = *33*)		*Inactive* (N = *41*)	
	Number	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*
Property crimes	23	31.3	18	54.5	5	12.2
Economic crimes	33	44.6	22	66.7	11	26.8
Violent crimes**	37	50.0	31	93.9	20	48.8
Drug sales (past 60 days)**	27	36.5	22	66.7	5	12.2

**$p \geq 0.01$.

[a]Property crime includes:

- Written gang graffiti on any property
- Written non-gang graffiti on any property
- Thrown rocks or bottles at someone, a vehicle, or property
- Damaged or destroyed someone's property worth less than $300
- Damaged or destroyed someone's property worth more than $300
- Set fire to a house/building

Economic crime includes:

- Stolen a bike or bike parts
- Stolen a motor vehicle
- Fenced or sold stolen goods
- Shoplifted
- Broke into some place to commit a theft
- Entered some place with the idea of committing a theft
- Sold a weapon
- Had sex for money or drugs
- Robbed someone without force or threat of force

Violent crime includes:

- Robbed someone by force or threat of force
- Beat up someone without using a weapon
- Beat up someone using a weapon like a gun or bat
- Participated in a drive-by or walk-by shooting
- Participated in a homicide

Drug sales include:

- Sold drugs in the past 60 days

Table 7. Logistic Regression Results

	B	Exp (B)
Constant	−3.570	.028
	(3.346)	
Age	.029	1.030
	(.132)	
Active gang status	3.406**	30.149
	(.928)	
Children	−.477	.620
	(.873)	
Early life/history		
Abused as a child	2.270*	9.683
	(1.053)	
Runaway from abuse	−.378	.685
	(.931)	
Parent's married	.133	1.143
	(.905)	
Government benefits	.729	2.074
	(.677)	
Parental crime		
Mother's drug use	.144	1.155
	(.762)	
Father's drug use	.831	2.297
	(.960)	
Mother arrested	−.712	.490
	(.942)	
Father arrested	−.928	.395
	(.680)	
Community intervention		
Church attendance	−.083	.921
	(.276)	
Leave community	.602	1.826
	(.774)	
Community support	.396	1.485
	(.854)	
χ^2	39.408	
−2 Log Likelihood	61.718	
Pseudo $R2$	.557	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.001$.

Research has shown (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993) that early teenage boys and girls who affiliate with gangs have higher rates of offending than they did pre- or post-gang affiliation. Our data show that teenage girls who asserted active gang participation did indeed have higher rates of offending, including violent behavior, than did young adult women who claimed inactive gang status. Similar findings exist in past research. Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) reported that crimes of violence and victimization status for a school-based sample of adolescent girls were higher for self-reported gang members. Miller (2001) added additional support finding significantly more delinquent behavior in female gang groups than

non-gang comparison groups. It would seem from both current and past research that a causal relationship exists between gang membership and violent crime. Our research adds to the complexity of the effect of gang affiliation by showing a relationship among age of independence (the age when gang girls say they are socially, emotionally, and economically independent of their households—they may or may not also be residentially independent), the onset of sexual activity, and gang membership.

High-School Pregnancy: Newly Acquired Community Ties

Uniformly in this sample, the transition from active to inactive gang woman is initiated by pregnancy: 63.4% ($n = 26$) of inactive gang women said that pregnancy was their main reason for leaving the street. When women did not specifically report pregnancy as the main reason for leaving active gang life, a proxy for pregnancy was often used. One respondent stated, "I was getting older and wanted to settle down." When asked to elaborate, it was found that "settling down" meant motherhood and establishing an independent residence. Without exception, all inactive gang women who had children said they stopped active gang involvement when they got pregnant. Even members who considered their gang status active reported differences in their activities when they became mothers. A few women in their early to mid 20s who were mothers said (paradoxically) they were still active gang members, but had stopped hanging out, fighting, and "being crazy." Pregnancy leads to a disinterest in hanging around the streets and an interest in the safety of the fetus that leads to reduced (or eliminated) drug use. Some women said when they got pregnant they thought for the first time about employment. Active gang women said they did not fight pregnant gang women, fearing injury to the fetus. As one girl said, "You can't punch a pregnant girl in the stomach. That's just wrong."

Older girls, pregnant and off the street, have a small but strong network of friends and little interest in the street. The flow of young girls into street networks is matched by late teenagers' movement off the street as they get pregnant and establish independent households.

Pregnancy is a life event that brings the social resources of the community into the North End. Our data show the North End as a socially and cognitively isolated community. By cognitive isolation we mean that sampled women did not try to resolve daily issues by first thinking of a contact in the mainstream community. While pregnancy in junior or senior high school is not considered in the mainstream community to have short- or long-term advantages, school opens information and social-support networks to local social-service agencies. A 17-year-old Gangster Disciple expressed her feelings of isolation: "When I wasn't pregnant, nobody cared about me. When I got pregnancy [age 15] there was people climbing over each other to get to me. Then when [Junior] was born, they all left, and here I am alone again."

Surely we are not advocating teenage pregnancy as a form of gang and crime intervention or as a mechanism to stimulate social-service delivery. We are, however, pointing out that there is a specific opportunity when North-End outsiders may enter the North End and deliver specific services with support of a young woman and her friendship and kinship network. When teens are pregnant and in need of immediate resources may be the only time when outsiders, especially those gang women call "social workers," are not shunned; even so, these outsiders bearing gifts are never really trusted. Social worker is the label given to the category of people who are outsiders providing social services. Although services are appreciated, social workers

are a threat to North-End mothers because social workers remove children from their homes. The role of social workers is worsened still when women retaliate against other women over an interpersonal dispute and call a local agency and report that so-and-so is abusing her child or maintains a filthy household that threatens the health of a child. Social workers have distinctly contrasting roles that perpetuate distrust among North-End mothers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our research sought to understand gang women's personal networks as a structural and functional entity in an impoverished community with youth gangs. Our data may be the basis for program and policy recommendations at an individual, household, family, neighborhood, and community level. We will here suggest three social-network-based policy recommendations that which address the delivery of services within a social structural framework. Our recommendations are based on the assumption that gang network members have long, continuous multi-relational ties (this assumption excludes network members whose association with gang women is short).

Social intervention and opportunities provision should focus on gang friendship networks. One's gang friendship network is not necessarily the same as one's crime network(s). Among friends in a gang network, same-gang affiliation is not a necessary precondition for friendship. Network members are not necessarily close or best friends. They may spend little time together; and in many cases, informants said they did not like to spend time with some girls they labeled friends. In short, gangs are social groups whose composition and size may widely vary, as will the affective ties among members.

These limitations of group interaction notwithstanding, this analysis has shown that gang affiliation occurs at the age when teenage girls face conditions of high stress. Gang joining seems likely to be a proxy for friendship formation and expansion. Intervention among adolescent women should focus on the provision of essential services (daycare, food, diapers, health care to young mothers and children, mental health) to the personal networks of strongly linked friends who share similar needs. The intervention unit should exceed the individual and her family (a girl may in fact be weakly linked to her family and have infrequent interactions with them) and should include a gang woman and her closest friends.

Community resources must be re-evaluated and re-marketed to provide needed services to gang networks. These data show gang women are unlikely to leave their isolated community to attain services. The larger community must find a way to meet the needs of these women, even if it means setting up shop in previously segregated areas. Not only would this serve as an intervention for gang-affiliated women, it could be the catalyst needed to strengthen isolated communities.

A social-network approach to gang intervention should be delivered with a careful assessment of how best to introduce social change into a gang friendship network. Women's gangs like those on the North End reveal a complex system of multiplex relations. With that in mind, the structural point of intervention is critical to success: network structure may restrain social processes, including attempts at intervention. The intervention issue is how, where, and with what to intervene in such structural complexity. Social intervention and opportunities provision are sources of informational assistance (job training, drug/alcohol education); however, informational sources of assistance must be introduced into the network in the right places. The right place

is where information and material assistance can benefit the highest number of people. This requires finding the central-most actors on a particular relation. The point is this: social structure and social process are integrally linked. An intervention approach absent of structural data will be much less effective in the short and long term. For stronger communities, intervention programs must target central members of gang networks.

Gang intervention would be best if it focused on strong ties among active gang members. The most effective gang-intervention social target would be a cohort of close and best friends, independent of gang affiliation. These people will likely have known one another a long time, have needs in common, and will act to assist one another (our data show bonding social capital is high). Some of these close/best friends may share crime propensities, especially income-generating activities. Keep in mind, however, crime partnerships may switch among close/best friends, so the crime-intervention social target may be elusive. In a dispersed, geographically distributed network, pulling an individual out of a network (suppression) would not likely have an effect on the structure and behavior of network friends. Arrests and punishment or threats of punishment for offenses like drug selling have no effect on changing negative (drug selling) to positive (employment) behavior. Drug selling, if done on a low-level scale, has few risks and provides immediate income. A ripple effect may likely occur as positive innovations (employment, treatment, day care, and so on) enter the network and flow among friends. If positive innovations fit the local culture and are offered in a way that is comfortable to local people, such innovations will likely have a good influence on gang women and their friends.

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