

Levels of involvement: differences between gang, gang-marginal, and nongang youth

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

Previous survey research has consistently observed a strong relationship between self-reported youth gang membership and delinquency, primarily using a dichotomous measure of gang membership (i.e., gang vs. nongang). Although often regarded as more parsimonious, measuring youth gang membership as a dichotomy conceivably overlooks meaningful variation among nongang members in terms of social proximity to the gang. Using data from a survey of over 500 middle school youth attending schools in known gang-problem neighborhoods in St. Louis, Missouri, this paper constructs a trichotomous measure of gang involvement which includes a category of youth, termed "gang-marginal," who do not claim membership in a gang but nevertheless exhibit gang associations and behaviors that place them at greater risk for future membership. Two research areas are examined in this study--(1) the relationship between differing levels of gang involvement and delinquency and victimization, and (2) the relationship between differing levels of gang involvement and key theoretical constructs. Findings from this project reveal important differences and similarities between youth across multiple levels of gang involvement. Delinquency rates among gang-marginal youth are observed to be consistently greater than nongang members and lesser than gang members, suggesting the delinquency-enhancing effects of gangs extend beyond membership boundaries. Additionally, while family-level factors (e.g., family member gang involvement) are found to be strongly associated with adolescent gang membership, factors across other domains, particularly the neighborhood, are observed to be strongly related to marginal gang involvement in early adolescence. These results are suggestive of overlapping yet distinctive processes by which youth become involved with gangs. Policy and program implications for preventing youth gang membership are discussed.