Gangs and Adolescent Development

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Gangs and Adolescent Development

- “So trained for the responsibility of citizenship, robbed of home and of childhood, with every prop knocked from under him, all the high ambition of youth caricatured by the slum...so equipped he comes into the business of life... As a young man he trains with the gang, because it furnishes the means of gratifying his inordinate vanity; that is the slum’s counterfeit of self-esteem.”
Jacob Riis, 1902


- “Gang life was a natural outcome for such youth.”

  (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: 4)
Why is gang membership natural?

1. A product of adolescent development in particular contexts.
   - What issues are all adolescents going through?

2. Why do youth make the predictably bad decision to involve themselves with gangs?
   - Risk and Uncertainty
     - Role of Violence

3. “Random” acts of violence as risk communication.
Guiding Assumptions

- The life course is a product of individual and environmental factors.
  - Individuals impact their environment
  - The environment impacts individuals
- Stages of the life course are connected.
  - Childhood ➔ Adolescence ➔ Adulthood
- There is no “reset button” in life
  - Prior decisions impact future outcomes
Why is gang membership natural?

- **Adolescence**: Youth begin to contemplate who they are and what it means with respect to longer-term outcomes.

  - Who am I?
    - Identity
  
  - What is my place in this world?
    - Relative to their peers (Social Sorting)
  
- Who will I be?
  
  - Where do people like me end up?
Adolescence is full of uncertainty

- What do I mean by uncertainty?
  - Hard to imagine your future self.
  - An uneasy, unpleasant feeling

- What does being average get you?
  - Educationally, Socially, Financially
  - What is the range in responses to this question?
  - How does where one lives impact the response?
The Effects of Uncertainty

- When long-term outcomes are uncertain proximal goals supersede distal aspirations.
  - Why invest in a future that is ambiguous?
    - Why build a strong resume?
    - Short-sighted, Focus on the present.
- Adolescence is a critical period for the development of human and social capital.
  - Decisions about education have lifelong consequences.
  - Building a strong pro-social network is imperative
    - “It is who you know, not what you know.”
Risk and Uncertainty

- All adolescents must deal with uncertainty.  
  - The range in possible outcomes varies widely, however.

- The risks associated with adolescence are more extreme in places where gangs flourish.  
  - Most youth do not have to consider the risks associated with serious violence.

**Proximal Risk**

**and**

**Distal Uncertainty**
Teen slain at McDonald's: 'Words cannot express the void he left’

- “I know this neighborhood, Rogers Park, is heaven for gang ties and gang affiliations, but Markeyo was not one of them,” said Bibbs, 28.
- "He never hung in the streets....He was a great kid, the average 17-year-old teen who loved to have fun, sports, hang out with friends. Loved his family, loved swimming. He’s a phenomenal kid.”
Gangs and Violence

- Violence sets gangs apart from other groups.

- Violence is “a central feature of the normative system of the gang; it is the defining feature and the central value of gang life.”

(Decker, 1996: p. 254)
The Search for Protection

- Gang members routinely identify the need for protection as a primary reason for joining a gang.
  - Decker and Van Winkle (1996)
    - 86 percent of St. Louis youth identified protection as a reason for joining.
  - “It’s like a comfortable feeling, you got someone to back you up and protect you” (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: 74).
Gangs and Victimization

- Gang members have been found to be at increased risk of experiencing serious violent victimization.
  - Experience a greater number of serious violent victimizations relative to non-gang youths
    (Curry et. al., 2002; Maxson et al., 2002; Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen, 2004)
  - “Gang homicide rates are estimated at up to 100 times that of the broader population”
    (Decker and Pyrooz 2010, pp. 129).
Victimization vs. Protection Paradox

• Why is gang membership attractive?
  ▫ “It is highly important to know that human behavior is primarily driven by perception and not by facts or by what is understood as facts by risk analysts and scientists.”
    (Renn, 2005: 31)
  ▫ Two dimensions to risk perception.
    ▫ Cognitive
    ▫ Emotional
How do we judge risks?

- Risk is viewed as unacceptable
- Risk is viewed as more acceptable

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<th>Not Observable</th>
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Cognitive
How do we judge risks?

Risk is viewed as acceptable

- Fair
- Voluntary
- Controllable
- Low Fear

Risk is viewed as unacceptable

- Not Fair
- Involuntary
- Uncontrollable
- High Fear
How do we judge risks?

- **Unknown Risk**
  - Fair
    - Voluntary
    - Controllable
    - Low Fear
    - *caffeine*
  - Not Fair
    - Involuntary
    - Uncontrollable
    - High Fear
    - *nuclear weapons*

- **Known Risk**
  - Low Fear
    - *swimming pools*
  - High Fear
    - *handguns*
How does gang membership affect judgments about the risks associated with violence?
How does gang membership affect judgments about the risks associated with violence?
Gang Membership and Protection

- Gangs do not reduce the probability of violence and victimization.
  - Gang membership increases violence
- *Gangs change how violence feels.*
  - Gangs make violence understandable.
  - “It’s like a **comfortable feeling**, you got someone to back you up and protect you”  
    (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: 74)
- Violence becomes more acceptable.
What are the implications?

- How do our prevention and intervention approaches address feelings of risk and uncertainty?
  - How can we alter judgments about risk?
- Information on the probability of violence alone will likely have little influence.
  - No impact on whether the source is known vs. unknown
  - No impact on perceptions of fairness or voluntariness
- Knowing the facts may not change how the threat of violence feels.
Thank You!

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