

The Role of Online Communication Among Gang and Non-Gang Youth

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Overview

Youth gangs have traditionally been described as groups of youth who hang out on the street. In fact, classic definitions include “street-orientation” as one of the criteria for defining a youth group as a gang. With the advent of the Internet and subsequent expansion of social media, to what extent, if any, has this technological innovation resulted in changes in the public nature of gang activities? Does the online environment provide a new realm of influence? In this fact sheet we use data from the first two waves of the UMSL CSSI to examine two related issues: 1) the role of online communication among gang and non-gang youth and 2) the effect of offline and online delinquent peers on delinquency.

Measuring Gang Membership

As reported in Fact Sheet #4, students completing the surveys were asked to indicate if they had ever belonged to a gang or if they were current gang members. An alternative measure of gang membership asks respondents “do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?” We combine responses to these two questions for an analytic sample of 219 gang-involved youth and 2,625 non-gang youth.

Online Communication

Figure 1 demonstrates that gang-involved youth are more active in the online environment than

their non-gang peers. Respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree with statements related to online activity (we collapsed agree and strongly agree for these items). While a minority of both groups agreed that they preferred communicating with friends online rather than in person, slightly more gang youth agreed (16% compared to 11%). Similarly, 32% of gang youth (compared to 23% of non-gang youth) indicate that it is easier for them to make friends online than in person. Two-thirds (64%) of the gang youth indicate that most or all of their in-person friends are also friends online, whereas slightly more than half (56%) of non-gang youth report substantial overlap between online and offline friends. Gang youth also appear to be more willing than non-gang youth (21% versus 15%) to have exclusively online friends; that is, they are more likely to have friends online that they have never met in person.

Online Disclosure

Table 1 shows that online postings about illegal activity are more common among gang members. More than half of the gang members (52%) indicated that they first learned about their friends’ illegal activities online rather than in person (compared to 22% of non-gang youth). With respect to discussing their own illegal activities, the majority

Figure 1. Online Communication among Gang & Non-Gang Youth

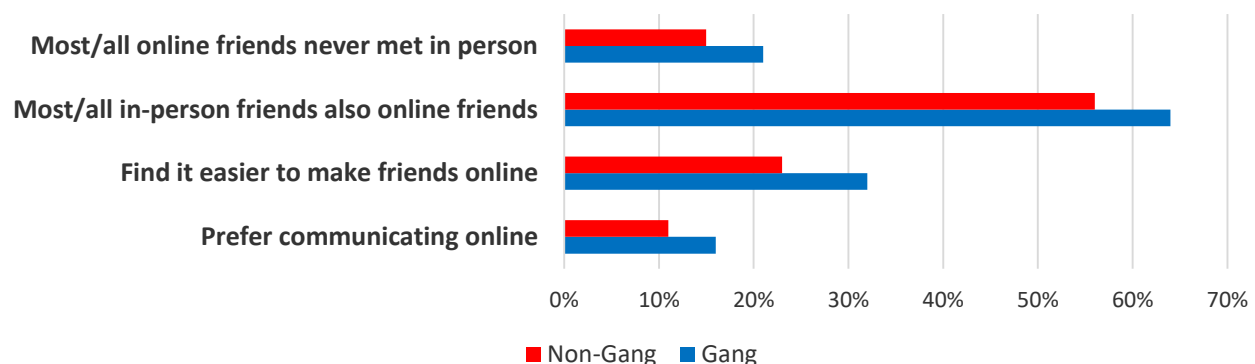


Table 1. Online Disclosure of Illegal Activities

	Gang	Non-Gang
First learned about friends' illegal activities online rather than in person	52%	22%
If you did something illegal and wanted to discuss it with your friends, would you prefer to do it online	14%	9%

of youth indicate they would generally do this in person. However, a higher percentage of gang members (14%) indicated they would primarily discuss illegal activities online compared with non-gang youth (9%).

The Effect of Offline and Online Peers

The differences in the use of online communication among gang and non-gang youth raises questions concerning whether online peers influence behavior. To address this issue we examined the unique effects of offline delinquent peers and online peer influence among both gang and non-gang youth. All of the analyses controlled for a number of demographic variables (sex, age, race, single-parent household) as well as a number of factors associated with delinquency (e.g., neighborhood and school disorder, offline and online parental monitoring, prosocial peers, temper, and hitting neutralizations).*

Table 2. Percentage Increases in Delinquency of Offline and Online Peers

	Gang	Non-Gang
Offline only (Step 1)	169%	70%
Online only (Step 2)	93%	60%
Both (Step 3)		
Offline	123%	48%
Online	NS	35%
Both including prior delinquency (Step 4)		
Offline	86%	32%
Online	NS	NS

The analyses proceeded in four steps. In step 1, we examined the unique effect of offline peers on delinquency and then in step 2 we assessed the effect of online peers only. As might be expected, the results from steps 1 and 2 (see Table 2) support the notion that both offline and online delinquent friends increase offending. Offline delinquent peers increase offending by 70% among non-gang youth and 169% among gang youth. Similarly, when including only the influence of online peers, offending rates are increased 60% for non-gang youth and 93% for gang youth. These results are statistically significant and suggest that both gang and non-gang youth are negatively influenced by both online and offline delinquent peers.

In step 3 we then examined the effect of including both forms of peer interaction on delinquency in one model and found less support for an additional effect of online peers once offline peer influence is included. For non-gang youth, delinquent peers increase offending by 48% and offline peer influence increases delinquency by 35%. For gang youth, there is no significant effect of online peers above and beyond the influence of offline peers, which increases delinquency by 123%. The final step provided the most complete analysis of the effect of offline and online peer influences by also controlling for individual prior delinquency. In these analyses, online peers do not contribute any additional influence on offending for either group but offline peers continue to increase offending (by 32% for non-gang youth and 86% for gang youth) (see Table 2).

Summary and Conclusion

This fact sheet indicates that gang-involved youth appear to be slightly more active in cyberspace than non-gang youth. They are more likely to use online communication, integrate offline and online contexts, and befriend online-only peers. They are also more likely to experience peer online disclosure related to delinquency, as well as disclose their own delinquency online. However, in spite of this greater reliance of gang youth on online communication, it does not appear that online peers influence delinquency above and beyond the influence of offline peers. The effect of offline peers continues to be of paramount importance for both gang and non-gang youth.

* See McCuddy and Esbensen (2019) for information regarding all variables and analyses presented in this fact sheet. Disclaimer: This research was supported in part by Award No. 2015-CK-BX-0021 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice.