

Gang Involved Youth and Their Impact on School Climate

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Overview

The vast majority of teachers (77%) and students (67%) in the CSSI study do not view gangs as a problem in their schools. These figures, however, suggest that 1/4 of school personnel and 1/3 of students do consider gangs to be a problem in their schools. In this research report we will: 1) examine the extent to which youth in middle and high school are gang involved; 2) describe the demographic characteristics of gang-involved youth; 3) determine if gang members are more delinquent than non-gang youth; and 4) provide policy implications.

Who Are the Gang-Involved Youth?

Students completing the surveys were asked to indicate if they had ever belonged to a gang or if they were current gang members. This self-nomination method has been found to be highly reliable and valid in prior research studies (and, it is also the primary criteria used by police departments to identify gang members). In Wave 2 of the CSSI survey, 102 youth indicated that they were currently members of a gang. This prevalence rate of 3.3% is similar to the rate of gang membership found in other school-based studies of middle and high school students. Contrary

to popular depictions, 43% of the gang members in this sample are females. While this figure may be surprising, it is consistent with other studies that report that between 25 and 50% of gang members are girls. As seen in Table 1, the gang members tend to be slightly older than non-gang youth. With respect to race, black youth are somewhat over-represented among the gang youth relative to the non-gang youth (black youth account for 51% of gang members but only 40% of non-gang youth); note, however, that white youth, while under-represented, are also gang involved.

Gang Members and Delinquency

Why are gangs viewed as a problem by some teachers and students? The answer to this question may be found in the higher rates of delinquency and victimization among gang-involved youth. As has been reported in other studies, the gang-involved students in this study tend to commit more illegal acts, both in school and outside of school. In Table 2 we report the percent of non-gang (column 1) and gang youth (column 3) who are involved in general delinquency (ranging from skipping school to theft and robbery) and violent offending (hitting someone with the idea of hurting them, attacking someone with a weapon, and using a weapon or force to get money from people) both in school and outside of school within the past six months. According to these self-reports, gang youth are two times more likely to have committed a general delinquent act than non-gang youth (82% compared to 43%). This difference in offending rates is more pronounced when we focus on violent events; while 14% of non-gang youth report committing a violent act, half (49%) of the gang youth did so. With respect to violent offending in school, 9% of the non-gang youth compared to 33% of gang youth reported these types of behaviors. Columns 2 and 4 in Table 2 report the average number of offenses committed by those youth who reported committing

Table 1. Demographics of Gang and Non-Gang Members at Wave 2

	Non-Gang Member (n=2,994)	Gang Member (n=99)
	%/mean	%/mean
Sex		
Male	46	57
Female	54	43
Race		
White	41	24
Black	40	51
Other	19	25
Age	14.12	14.27

NOTE: There were 260 respondents who did not answer all items and are thus excluded.

Table 2. Offending and Victimization Across Measures of Gang Membership at Wave 2

	Non-Gang Member (n=2,838)		Gang Member (n=89)	
	%	mean	%	mean
Delinquency	43	5.17	82	16.81
In-School Delinquency	17	3.60	51	10.2
Violence	14	2.67	49	5.27
In-School Violence	8.9	2.55	33	5.03
General Victimization	27	3.93	46	7.93
Attacked/Threatened to or from school	1.9	2.30	9.0	3.75
Attacked/Threatened at school	3.6	2.36	18	3.00
Things Stolen at School	16	2.21	27	2.88

NOTE: The mean values refer to the frequency of offenses/victimization among those who are offenders/victims. There were 238 respondents who did not answer all items and are thus excluded.

at least one offense. That is, of the 14% of non-gang youth who committed a violent act, the average number was 2.67 offenses compared to more than 5 offenses committed by the gang member youth. Similar to the prevalence findings, for each type of offending, gang youth reported two to three times as many offenses as the non-gang youth.

The bottom half of Table 2 reveals similar results for self-reported victimizations. Gang members are more likely to be victims of crime and are more likely to be victimized more frequently than are non-gang youth. The difference is especially pronounced for students who are attacked or threatened: less than 2% of non-gang youth have been threatened on their way to or from school compared with 9% of gang youth. Of importance is the finding that, while at school, 3.6% of non-gang youth had been threatened or attacked compared to 18% of gang members. Consistent with prior work, being in a gang does not protect students from victimization either at school or outside of school.

Gang Membership Over Time

A common belief is that gang membership is a permanent status, that is, “blood in, blood out.” Over the course of the past 25 years, a number of longitudinal studies have questioned this assertion that “once in a gang, always in a gang.” In fact, a

number of adolescent studies finds that the average length of gang membership is one year. Among the UMSL CSSI students who completed both Wave 1 and Wave 2 surveys, the vast majority (94.5%) were not gang-involved during either year. Of the 163 youth who reported gang membership during one or both years, 70 (43%) were gang members only in W1 and 62 (38%) were gang members in W2 only; the remaining 31 (19%) reported being in a gang during both surveys.

Policy Implications

It is important to highlight that during the time a youth is gang involved, their rates of offending and victimization are greatly increased. This fact has serious ramifications for prevention efforts; preventing youth from joining gangs, even for one year, has significant effects on delinquent behavior and victimization both in-school and out of school. Efforts should be focused on reducing problem behaviors by reducing gang association. One promising program schools might consider is the middle school-based G.R.E.A.T. program that is taught by uniformed law enforcement officers (often school resource officers). Reducing the prevalence of gangs in schools is one mechanism for increasing school safety among students and school personnel.