

Cultural Explanations for Vietnamese Youth Involvement in Street Gangs

Public Safety: Gangs and Delinquency Research
Project 95-JD-FX-0014

Final Report

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FOREWORD

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This research required the participation of many parents and youths. We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of each family interviewed as part of this project. Many parents participated not only out of concern for their own teens, but also out of concern for youth in the community who choose to become involved in street gangs and those who become delinquent. We share this concern, and deeply appreciate the effort put forth by many individuals who joined us in our search for effective means to keep youth from gangs and delinquency:

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this project was to provide recommendations toward the development of effective community-based programs to prevent gang membership and related delinquency. This cross-sectional study examined the relationship between gang involvement and delinquency in communities which have a large number of Vietnamese refugee families in Southern California. Intra-ethnic group comparisons of delinquency using 1,032 official records showed that Asian gang delinquency represents up to 48% of all Asian delinquency. Hypotheses concerning both cultural and non-cultural aspects of the etiology of youth gang involvement were developed in a series of focus groups with experts in Vietnamese culture and experts in gang behavior. Interviews with 270 pairs of Vietnamese parents and youths were conducted in a community agency setting by trained Vietnamese interviewers. Gang involvement was measured using both a traditional method, and an innovative method which quantified the centrality of gang members in the social life of the youth. Multivariate analyses indicated that non-cultural explanations were more predictive than cultural explanations of gang involvement. The best predictors were a positive attitude toward gangs on the part of the youth, and the presence of gangs in the youth's residential neighborhood environment. Findings suggest that promising approaches to reducing gang participation should include changing attitude toward gangs from positive to negative. Additionally, youth should be equipped with interpersonal skills to resist the influence of gangs within their residential areas. Attitude change and gang resistance skills should be incorporated into programs designed to reduce gang involvement among youth.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the typical effort toward reducing gang crime has focused upon punishment in accordance with criminal law. However, criminal prosecution is merely a distal reaction to the complex antecedent social issues that precipitate gang crime. A more parsimonious and efficient response to gang delinquency may be to prevent it before it occurs. The most efficient efforts will likely be those that prevent individuals from ever becoming involved in groups that facilitate and promote crime and delinquency.

Both field experience and research show that individual involvement in street gangs precipitates criminal offenses (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1989; Rhodes & Fischer, 1993). The most convincing work in this area uses longitudinal research designs to examine gang participation and violent crime (see Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano & Hawkins, 1998). In these studies it was found that youth committed more delinquent acts during gang membership than before entering or after exiting the gang. On the assumption that gang involvement facilitates and promotes crime, the most direct way to reduce it will be to reduce individual involvement in gangs. Designing effective gang involvement prevention programs requires accurate information concerning why youth become involved in gangs.

BACKGROUND

Scholarly work aimed at understanding street gangs has been underway for about 75 years. Research efforts have focused upon the development of groups, their characteristics, and group behavior. The most widely known gang research centers on descriptions of gangs (see Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Spergel, 1964; Thrasher, 1927; Yablonsky, 1959), and of

societal responses to gangs (see Knox, 1995; Klein, 1971, 1995; Spergel, 1995). However, the fundamental question as to why individuals become involved in street gangs has been comparatively overlooked. Rather, scholars offer opinion and anecdote as substitutes for empirical evidence when questioned on this matter of central importance. Few studies have explicitly identified, operationalized, and tested independent variables predicting individual gang involvement. Some research has made comparisons between gang and nongang youth on explanatory constructs (e.g., Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993), but this approach overlooks possible influences of mediating and moderating variables. However, the extant quantitative studies are valuable because they can demonstrate the power of various predictors, their relative predictive ability, and how predictors may differ for various types of street gangs. Most important, this information can be used to design and manage programs to prevent individual involvement in gangs.

Vietnamese American Gangs

Ethnic status and gender are the most universally used demographic descriptors of street gang members. The National Youth Gang Survey reported that most members of the nation's street gangs are male (96%), and are ethnic minorities: 55% African American (Black), 33% Latino American (Latino), 6% Asian American (Asian) (Curry, 1996). One distinguishing feature of gangs is that they are almost always mono-ethnic. Although this is a simplification, gangs can generally be categorized as Black, Latino, and Asian (most Northern European American ("White") gangs are hate groups, and hate crime differs from that of other gangs). It appears that minority in ethnicity is an important factor in describing gangs. Thus, it seems clear that there must be some factor between minority and majority groups that can account for gang

formation and individual involvement in gangs. If, indeed, there are cultural factors at play in gang formation and individual participation in gangs, the opportunity to examine a newly arrived minority population during the period of street gang formation and participation could prove to be quite valuable, as it provides a natural occasion to examine gang involvement free of the strong familial and generational influences prevalent in gang participation among established ethnic minority populations.

Vietnamese American (Vietnamese) gangs are a comparatively recent phenomenon when contrasted with established Black and Latino gangs, and several general descriptions of them have been published (see Burke & O'Rear; Jablonsky, n.d.; Kodluboy, 1996; Nye, 1994; Song & Dombrink, 1994; Vigil & Yun, 1990). It is well-known that refugees experience a great deal of trauma when exiting a homeland and entering a new culture (Chambon, 1989), and the plight of Vietnamese immigrants (see Haines, Rutherford, Thomas, & Thomas, 1981; Henkin & Nguyen, 1981; Montero, 1979) is sometimes cited as the source of individual and social pressures that cause Vietnamese youth to involve themselves in gangs (Tran, 1990). Exactly how this trauma causes youth to become involved in gangs has not been articulated.

These experiences are in stark contrast with almost all other ethnic groups, including Chinese Americans, who may have long family traditions of gang membership. Further, in contrast with Chinese American gangs, Vietnamese gangs do not have a long history of ties to organized crime. In all, Vietnamese gangs are a relatively recent phenomenon. Individual involvement in gangs for this group is largely free of familial and generational influences which are two factors that may explain a large amount of youth involvement in gangs for other ethnicities. Regardless of past experiences, Vietnamese refugee youth were in their teen years at

the time of this report. They either arrived in the United States when they were very young, or even more likely, were born here. A few may have older brothers involved in gangs, but they certainly do not have fathers or uncles involved in gangs. Several types of factors which may lead to gang involvement for Vietnamese youth of the present day are described below. We classify them into cultural explanations and non-cultural explanations. Although a central theme in this project was to examine cultural explanations of gang involvement, to provide as much information as possible, it was useful to compare them with non-cultural explanations.

Non-Cultural Explanations For Gang Involvement

Five non-cultural explanations were selected for inclusion in this study: (1) The utilitarian perspective, which states that the balance between benefits and costs of gang involvement is the best predictor of gang involvement; (2) The social problems perspective, which fundamentally suggests that financial resources and social opportunities are the best predictors of gang involvement; (3) The public health perspective, which declares that the identification of risk and protective factors is the best way to predict gang involvement; (4) Social developmental theory, which emphasizes that social bond, social environment, and psychological development influence gang involvement; and (5) Social learning theory, which asserts that the influence of differential association, differential reinforcement, and differential definition are most important in predicting gang involvement. For purposes of this report, the term *theory* represents a tested set of interrelated hypotheses or propositions while the term *perspective* represents merely a set of predictor variables. Later, the term *model* is used to mean interrelated hypotheses or propositions as yet untested. These may be thought of as theory candidates.

Utilitarian Perspective

One of the simplest explanations for gang involvement, the utilitarian perspective, posits that youth who perceive the benefits of gang involvement to outweigh its costs will be attracted to gangs. Some of the most common benefits of gang involvement have included the emotional excitement, social camaraderie, financial gain, and satisfaction of psychological needs. As early as 1927 (Thrasher), it has been suggested that youth are motivated to participate in street gangs, at least in part, to obtain the “thrills and excitement” that gangs offer. However, this explanation does not hold much promise for understanding gang membership for several reasons. First, it seems unlikely that this is the only reason that youth participate in gangs. There are other opportunities for entertainment. Why would some youth choose the entertainment value of gang involvement over another kind of entertainment? Perhaps entertainment is one motivation, but it hardly provides enough information from which to develop a prevention program. Second, this perspective does not thoroughly explain why or how the benefits of gang involvement come to outweigh its costs.

Other benefits named have included financial gain and social benefits. Many researchers have posited that youth become involved in gangs due to lack of legitimate economic opportunities, and that gangs provide an opportunity for financial gain (see Hagedorn, 1988; Moore, 1978). Using this rationale, one would expect that gang members would almost exclusively come from families who live in poverty, and that gang members would be found in areas of the nation with the least economic opportunity. Thus, the appropriate intervention strategy would be to provide jobs for gang members in order to eliminate the need to be involved in the street gang. Using this rationale, one would not expect to find a gang member who is

gainfully employed. This approach seems to indicate that gangs might only exist when no opportunities for financial gain are available, but this certainly does not seem to be the case.

It has also been suggested that youth join street gangs for the social benefits of friendship and social status among peers (see Spergel, 1964; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988a). Indeed, researchers who have studied the development of gangs as social phenomena (as opposed to motivations for involvement) have observed that gangs often develop out of friendship groups. Certainly, social benefits must play a role, for if the social relationships were not satisfying the group would almost certainly cease to exist. The implication for a prevention program would be to encourage the development of effective relationships with individuals who do not engage in criminal activity. Other explanations for membership have included the fulfillment of psychological needs of individuals incapable of finding fulfillment in the larger society (Yablonsky, 1959). Unfortunately, researchers have used sociological labels (e.g., deviant individualists) as inappropriate substitutions for psychological constructs, and have used terms that are imprecise and left unoperationalized (e.g., competitiveness, wariness, self-reliance, survival instincts). This explanation requires much more specification by precisely defining the needs that are met by gang membership.

A study that included an extensive battery of psychological and other variables believed to be predictive of gang membership was conducted by Friedman, Mann, & Friedman (1975). Data were collected from 536 male Black (61%) and White (39%) students. Gang membership was recorded as a dichotomous variable from self-report of membership, and checked against local police records. The 79 independent variables combined to account for 47% of the variance in gang membership. The three best predictors were parental defiance, nonviolent delinquent acts, and alcohol use. Although these may be correlates, they do not seem to be good independent predictors of gang

involvement. Implying that they are suggests that alcohol use, nonviolent delinquent acts, and parental defiance cause gang membership. It is far more likely that these are merely correlates of gang involvement. Moreover, the results of this study may be questionable because the stepwise regression analysis used capitalizes upon chance. This error is not remedied by the large sample size, as the authors suggest.

A similar approach has been taken in the explanation of Asian gangs--noting the possible benefits of physical protection, social power, and respect from others (English, 1995). If, indeed, these are seen as important gang benefits, perhaps youth with the potential for gang involvement overlook the fact that, in addition to obtaining the physical protection of the gang, they are also inheriting the physical threats--the enemies of the gang as well. Social power and respect are also interesting possible benefits because these are largely benefits bestowed by peer reference groups outside the gang. For some unknown reason, many teens revere and respect gangs and those involved in them.

In all, many scholars have favored the idea that perceived gang benefits are predictive of gang involvement. As one author put it, if there were no incentives to participate, then there would be no participation (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). If this is indeed the key to gang involvement, then reducing the perceived benefits of gang involvement and increasing its perceived costs may be the best way to prevent gang involvement.

Social Problems Perspective

The utilitarian perspective considers benefits and costs of gang involvement at the individual level. The social problems perspective considers societal-level factors that may influence gang involvement. The social problems perspective is one in which gang involvement

is ultimately explained by lack of employment and social opportunities. Additional social factors may be involved (including cultural factors, reserved for a later section) that create an “underclass” with subsequent and confounded social problems. Unfortunately, this description has led to such nebulous terms as “multiple marginalization” and to politically charged terms such as “empowerment.” Therefore, it has become of little practical value. This general approach is used by some sociologists and anthropologists to account for social problems. One popular perspective is that youth are “pushed” into gangs by poverty and minority status, and that gang involvement provides a sense of self-importance and valued social relationships (Vigil, 1988b). In essence, the development of “underclass youth groups” (i.e., street gangs) is believed to occur as a response to youths’ frustration with their lack of opportunity to attain financial status and social gain through legitimate channels (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Currie, 1993; Bernard, 1990). According to this explanation of gang involvement, the most effective way to reduce gang participation is to improve opportunities for financial and social gain for minority youth.

Public Health Perspective

The public health perspective is based on the categorization of factors that are believed to promote or inhibit disease. Disease risk factors are those, which when present, are associated with an increased probability of future disease development. These factors may be immutable (e.g., gender or ethnicity) or mutable (e.g., beliefs or behaviors). Disease protective factors are those, which when present, are associated with a decreased probability of future disease development. Both risk and protective factors are found in social, physical, and biological environments as well as the genetic constitution of the subject (Mausner & Kramer, 1985). From these factors,

calculations of relative risk and attributable risk can be computed. The foundation of this analysis is the odds ratio, which pertains to the odds of contracting the disease with certain factors present and absent. Public health officials attempt to prevent diseases by identifying and manipulating relevant risk and protective factors. Some policy makers have suggested the same approach should be applied to social problems, such as delinquency. To do this, apparently, one simply substitutes the term delinquency for the term disease, and begins searching for the relevant risk and protective factors.

The authors are quite skeptical that this approach will be useful in the explanation of youth involvement in street gangs. The primary reason for the skepticism is that three of the four areas of risk factors, genetic constitution, biological environment, and physical environment, are largely irrelevant to the problem of gang involvement. Research has not demonstrated how genetic makeup or biological factors are causally related to delinquency. Additionally, the physical environment seems to hold little promise in the explanation of gang involvement, other than perhaps that of exposure and opportunity. This leaves us with only a fragment of the public health perspective, social environment, to be relevant in explaining gang involvement. Thus, presumably, herein lies the key to reducing gang involvement. To say that gang involvement is a problem rooted in the social environment does not contribute explanatory power beyond stating the obvious in identifying the cause of gang involvement. Nevertheless, due to the wide interest in examining the usefulness of this approach to explaining delinquency, the approach was included in the present study.

Social Developmental Theory

A variation of a social developmental model proposed by Fagan (1990) was operationalized and used by Wang (1996) in the study of gang membership. Fagan's application

of social development theory to gangs states that social bonding (conventional norms and beliefs that prohibit an individual from gang involvement), social environment (environmental influences that direct and intensify social bonds and gang involvement), and psychological development (psychological influences, e.g., control, values, or self-esteem, that may influence gang involvement) predict gang affiliation. Wang's analysis was conducted by surveying 358 Asian high school students in classrooms across the nation. The proportions of the sample represented by females and Asian ethnicities (e.g., Chinese, Korean, etc.) was not reported. The dependent variable was self-report of gang affiliation coded as follows: (1) know a gang name; (2) has close friends who are gang members; (3) ever asked to join a gang; (4) ever joined a gang; (5) asked to join a gang in the past two months; and (6) a current gang member. This variable was treated as ratio-level data in the analysis. The final regression model contained 15 demographic, social bond, social environmental, and psychological development variables that accounted for 74% of the total variance of gang affiliation. However, upon examination of the independent variables, it is likely that the analyses suffered from the effects of multicollinearity, resulting in an inflated R statistic. It is also likely that the dependent variable is positively skewed. There is no indication that any assumptions of multiple regression analysis were checked before the final analysis. Moreover, it can be seen that the variables labeled as developmental are, in fact, not psychological development variables. These variables were ethnic integration, peer integration, perception of gang threat, estimation of the number of gang-affiliated classmates, attitude toward law, self-esteem, and belief in luck. These variables do not adequately measure psychological development, and thus do not constitute a good test of the social developmental model.

Social Learning Theory

A variation of Social Learning Theory proposed by Akers (1992) was operationalized and tested by Winfree, Bäckström & Mays (1994) in their study of gang membership. Akers borrowed from operant psychology by proposing that social reinforcements—rewards and punishments—determine repeated behavior. In application to gang involvement, differential associations (such as delinquent peers), differential attitudes (views of peers and adults toward gangs and gang activity), and differential reinforcements (positive and negative consequences of gangs) can be viewed as gang involvement reinforcers and punishers. Winfree’s study is based upon surveys of 197 ninth grade students in a New Mexico classroom setting. Sample demographics were reported as 70% male, 75% Latino, 20% White, and 5% other. The dependent variable was self-report of gang membership. Individuals were dichotomously coded as being gang members based upon four criteria: (1) if they reported ever to have been “in” a gang; (2) if they reported to have ever engaged in illicit activity (i.e., sex, drug, or alcohol behaviors) or a criminal offense; (3) if they reported involvement with a group having an initiation, specific leader, or nicknames for members; and (4) if they reported having worn “colors” tattoos, or jewelry, or used hand signs. The final Logit model contained 11 demographic, differential association, differential reinforcement, and differential definition variables. Only two of these variables, number of friends in a gang, and attitude toward gangs were predictive of gang membership. Of course, the independent variable, number of friends in a gang, and dependent variable, gang membership, are confounded. The variable, number of friends in a gang, should have been left out of the analysis with gang membership as a dependent variable, leaving attitude toward gangs as the only good predictor in this study. A second study

also considered the ability of learning theory¹ to predict gang involvement in a small sample of youth (N=94) living in Seattle (Brownfield, Thompson, and Sorenson, 1997). The measures used in this study were not comparable to that of Winfree et al., but also report peer delinquency and attitude to be related to gang involvement.

Cultural Explanations For Asian American Gang Involvement

The cultural identity of individuals in an ethnic minority population is believed by some to be an important influence on behavior, including that relating to family functioning (Gushue, 1993) and gang involvement (Vigil, 1998a). Some refugee parents believe their youth have become “too Americanized” and fear they have lost influence and control over their children (Baptiste, 1993; Palmer, 1992). For many youth exposed to American culture, traditional Asian family life seems oppressive and distressing. Becoming involved in a street gang may be a way for young men to obtain independence and autonomy from the family. For young women, running away from home is sometimes also used to gain similar independence. Moreover, several scholars believe that family function and gang involvement are related among ethnic minority youth (Alder, Ovando, & Hocevar, 1984; Belitz & Valdez, 1994). One possibility is that gangs may serve as a surrogate family (Morales, 1982, 1992; Morales & Sheafor, 1992; Vigil, 1988a). Others have suggested that gang involvement is attractive to youth who experience conflict with family over cultural preferences. Yet, even when independent of family conflict, some scholars have suggested that unwillingness to identify oneself as Asian together

¹This study also considered Social Strain Theory –that differential expectations and desires in social and economic opportunities predict gang involvement; and Social Control Theory –that weak social control (e.g., positive attitude toward education, reverence for authority, parental attachment, parental concern, etc.), and social disorganization predict gang involvement. Neither theory received strong support.

with an inability to acquire an American identity ultimately leads to gang involvement (e.g., Song, Dombrink, & Geis, 1993).

An individual having experience working with Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian youth in various juvenile rehabilitation facilities in Santa Clara County, California, has described factors he believes to have the greatest influence in youth gang involvement (Long & Ricard, 1996). These were named as follows: (1) Shortcomings in the home environment; (2) Alienation from school; (3) Estrangement from American culture; and (4) Peer pressure. However, many youth come from families that are far from perfect. A large share of them may have difficulty adapting to American culture and language, and cope with pressure from peers, but do not become involved in gangs. While Long and Ricard colorfully illustrate a very real problem, this is not a systematic study of it. They do not explain why many youth who experience these same difficulties do not become involved in gangs. The aspect of “estrangement from American culture,” however, has caught the attention of many professionals interested in the problem of gang involvement. Some of these have suggested that youth who believe they do not “fit into” the American culture are more likely to become involved in gangs than those who do fit in (Long & Picard, 1996; English, 1995; Vigil, 1988b).

Still others have suggested that the greatest threat to identity in refugee youth is the feeling of belonging to no culture (Tobin & Friedman, 1984). A loss of identity with the Asian culture together with an inability to adopt an American cultural identity has been referred to as cultural marginalization (Ross-Sheriff, 1992). This idea suggests that youth who do not identify themselves as Americans, and who do not identify themselves as Asian, adopt the identity of “gang member” as an alternative cultural identity. This model has great appeal because it

consists of clearly identifiable relationships and it sounds plausible. Further, if true, there is the obvious implication for a reduction in gang involvement: design programs that help youth adopt a more constructive identity in order to eliminate the need for gang affiliation.

Summary

Much of the research on gangs has focused on description and response, rather than on the etiological aspects of gang involvement. A clear, empirically based understanding of why youth become involved is essential in order to design effective gang membership prevention programs. Many possibilities have been suggested to explain why Vietnamese youth become involved in gangs. Some of these explanations relate to culture and cultural adaptation issues. The opportunity has presented itself to explore this possibility in a newly arrived refugee group-- Vietnamese Americans--in which gang formation and development seems to be rapidly growing. Still, other scholars have suggested that the reasons for gang involvement among Vietnamese youth are not different from those for youth of other ethnic groups.

OVERVIEW

The overall aim of this study was to develop a better understanding of the scope of youth involvement in gangs and delinquency, and why Vietnamese youth become involved in gangs. Study I consisted of reviews of official crime reports to determine the proportion of total reported delinquency for which gang and nongang youth are responsible. Study II consisted of social science interviews of Vietnamese youth and their parents to explore both cultural and non-cultural reasons for Vietnamese youth involvement in gangs.

Target Population

The target population was selected because it provided a unique opportunity to examine cultural factors that may account for gang involvement. Vietnamese gangs are a relatively recent phenomenon, and youth participation in them is largely free from familial and generational gang influences. Several explanations for gang involvement have been advanced that suggest that maladaptation to the majority culture may play a significant role in gang formation and participation. A population of Vietnamese refugees with a large presence of street gangs was available in the Little Saigon area of Westminster, California. This area of Vietnamese refugees became well established in the early 1980s. Official estimates of refugees living in this area have been placed at 14,879. Unofficial estimates are considerably higher. Regardless of the lack of valid information on its size, this population was sizable enough to contain large numbers of Vietnamese teenage youths. Two high schools in this area together reported an Asian enrollment of 1,574 individuals, 51% of the total enrollment in the 1995/96 school year.

Descriptive data concerning the incidence and prevalence of Vietnamese gang crime, in general, are difficult to find for several reasons: (1) Many law enforcement agencies do not systematically identify and report frequencies of gang crimes; (2) Opinions regarding what should be classified as a gang crime differ among agencies and are debated by criminologists; and (3) Efforts to obtain this information through survey research are in the early stages of development.² Thus, information on the prevalence of Vietnamese gang crime is simply not available. However, concern regarding it is of sufficient magnitude to attract considerable

²National survey data are currently obtained through opinion-based estimates by law enforcement personnel, rather than by actual counts of specific individuals.

popular attention to the issue. Factors such as lack of information regarding Vietnamese gang involvement, and the need to develop effective gang membership prevention programs for this population, gave rise to the present study.

STUDY I: GANG DELINQUENCY

The goal of the first study was to describe the proportion of delinquency attributable to Asian gang and nongang groups. Information concerning Latino and White ethnic categories were included as well, because collection of the additional data was feasible and was useful for comparison purposes.

Descriptive analyses were conducted chiefly to address the primary research questions posed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: (1) To document the proportion of total delinquency for which gang-involved youth are responsible; (2) To document the proportion of total juvenile delinquency for which nongang law-violating youth groups are responsible; (3) To examine why youth participate in gangs; and (4) To examine risk and protective factors which influence gang involvement.

Method

Westminster crime reports collected over a one year period were reviewed for juvenile involvement. Information concerning the offense, suspects' ethnicity, and gang involvement was extracted from each report that included one or more juvenile suspects. Research questions were addressed by computing necessary frequencies and proportions for juvenile suspects only.

Procedure

All reports written between July 1, 1995 and June 30, 1996 were reviewed by a trained research technician. The review was conducted retrospectively for the first six month period and

prospectively for the second six month period. Each crime report containing a juvenile named as a suspect was selected for data collection. All juvenile reports were ostensibly reviewed to avoid the appearance in the department of a focus upon delinquency of individuals of a particular ethnic group.

Unit of Analysis

A research record was made for each observation of a juvenile suspect in every crime report (N=1,032). Thus, the unit of analysis was juvenile involvement in delinquency offenses according to official police records. This means that when a report was reviewed, each juvenile involved in the offense was counted as a single case. The sum of these observations does not represent the number of delinquent juveniles (as specific individuals are often involved in more than one offense), nor does the sum of these observations represent the number of offenses (as offenses often involved more than one individual). Using the number of juveniles who committed offenses, or the number of offenses in which juveniles were involved, would understate the actual level of juvenile involvement in delinquent acts. Because the present research question centered on the proportion of juvenile involvement, the unit of analysis is the occurrence of juvenile involvement in delinquency.

Demographics

The majority of the sample consisted of youth under the age of 18 years. A small proportion of youth aged 18 or 19 years were also included. In many cases these youth were co-defendants of youth under the age of 18. Excluding these individuals from the analysis on the basis of the legal criterion of 18 years seemed arbitrary. The age distribution of suspects in the sample was 1.6% for youths aged 0-11 years, 7.0% 12-13 years, 39.0% 14-15 years, 42.0% 16-17

years, and 9.5% 18-19 years of age. The gender distribution was 32.6% females and 67.4% males. Ethnicity distribution was 39.1% Asian, 29.5% Latino, 28.0% White, and 3.4% Other ethnicity. Southeast Asians made up the largest share (92.3%) of the Asian category, and most (87.1%) were Vietnamese.

Measures

In order to compute proportions of delinquency attributable to gang and nongang groups, gang affiliation, offense codes, and number of accomplices named in the report were noted.

Gang Involvement

In the absence of a consensus on the definition of “gang” in either academia or government, a practical definition of a gang was required for this project. A gang was defined as a loose organization of peers having a name, identifiable leadership, and collective actions that include illegal activities. This conception of a gang usually guides what information concerning gangs is placed in crime reports. Gang involvement was determined by reading each crime report and assigning one of three possible levels of gang affiliation to each individual juvenile suspect. If an individual was classified as a gang member, this variable was coded with a two. This means that gang membership was clearly evident because one or more of the following was true: historical contact with a law enforcement agency; documentation of gang identification, such as tattoos or cigarette burns known to have specific gang meanings; claims membership in a gang, or commits an offense that is gang-specific (e.g., vandalism that involves gang symbols, assault and battery concerning gang turf, or with individuals of a rival gang). If an individual was possibly involved in a gang, this variable was coded with a one. This means that the individual may have been arrested with, or is known to associate with, gang members. Or, the

individual fits the criteria described in category two, but does not acknowledge gang membership. If there was no evidence of gang involvement, this variable was coded with a zero. Overall, 688 (66.7%) of the suspects were not involved with a gang, 147 (14.2%) were possibly involved with a gang; and 197 (19.1%) were definitely involved with a gang. Results are presented in ranges in order to accommodate varying opinions among readers as to the validity of the gang involvement criteria, and provide the greatest amount of information possible. For example, when a result is reported as follows: “Total delinquency attributable to gangs ranged from 19% - 33%,” the lower value is a selective approach to gang identification, using only cases coded as two. We call this a restrictive identification of gang involvement. The upper value is a comprehensive approach to gang identification using both cases coded as one or two. We call this an inclusive identification of gang involvement. The actual proportion of delinquency attributable to gang involvement is likely to lie somewhere between these values. These values, of course, are based upon offenses known to the police. Because there may very well be gang offenses having been unreported, these should be viewed as conservative estimates.

Accomplices

There were four levels in the accomplice variable. The number of accomplices was coded as zero when a suspect acted alone. If one or two accomplices were involved, this variable was coded with a one or a two, respectively. If three or more accomplices were involved, this variable was coded with a three. Overall, 564 (54.7%) of incidents involved one individual; 194 (18.8%) of incidents involved one accomplice; 111 (10.8%) involved two accomplices; and 163 (15.8%) involved three or more accomplices.

Offenses

In order to maintain consistency with both federal and state crime coding methods, only the most serious offense in the report was coded for each case. This method resulted in an underestimation of total delinquency because it did not count co-offenses. Reliability of coding of offenses was checked by comparing judgements of raters working independently of one another. Of the 1,032 records, a systematic random sample and examination of 10% of cases produced a rate of agreement in coding categories of 97.1%, indicating that the categorization was reliable. The small amount of disagreement occurred largely as a result of ambiguous description of circumstances documented in the crime report. Overall, categorization of offenses was very reliable.

Findings

These data were examined with regard to delinquency committed by individuals alone and individuals with accomplices, gang and nongang affiliated. Ethnic categories were also examined to perform between and within group comparisons.

Gang-involved delinquency

Of the 1,032 incidents of juvenile involvement in delinquency, males with definite gang involvement accounted for 24.3% of incidents involving male suspects. Female suspects with definite gang involvement accounted for 8.3% of incidents involving female suspects. Tables 1 and 2 provide a detailed description of gang involvement, ethnicity, and delinquent acts by gender. Data in these and subsequent tables in this section are presented in raw frequencies. This was done to permit the computation of additional information to accommodate varying interests of readers. The first research question concerned the proportion of total incidents of juvenile involvement for which gang-involved

Table 1. Male juvenile involvement in delinquent acts by number of accomplices and street gang affiliation

FBI PART I CRIME	NO GANG INVOLVEMENT				POSSIBLE GANG INVOLVEMENT				DEFINITE GANG INVOLVEMENT				CRIME TOTAL	% OF SUBTOTAL	% OF GRAND TOTAL
	0	1	2	3+	Total	0	1	2	3+	Total	0	1			
Accomplices	0	1	2	3+	Total	0	1	2	3+	Total	0	1	2	3+	Total
Part I CRIME															
Homicide															
Rape	1				1					1	3	1		5	9
Robbery	2	1			3					0				0	0
Assault	6	3	4		13	2	3			5	2	3		5	
Burglary	11	15	4	7	37	1	1	7	9	29	3	1	5	11	
Theft - Vehicle	6	6	11	1	24	6	1	4	3	14	2	9	6	22	
Theft - Larceny	3	4			7	7	5		5	17	1			6	
Arson	2	1			3					0				0	
Subtotal	29	31	20	8	88	7	6	9	41	63	7	20	12	41	80
% of Total	33.0%	35.2%	22.7%	9.1%	100.0%	11.1%	9.5%	14.3%	65.1%	100.0%	8.8%	25.0%	15.0%	51.3%	100.0%
% of gang involvement for Part I crime					38.1%					27.3%					34.6%
NON-PART I CRIME															
Drug Offense	14	1	2		16					1	5	2		7	
Alcohol Offense	7	1	1		9	1				1	2			2	
Weapons Offense	3		4		7	2	3			2	1	1		4	
Warrant/Probation	5				5	5				6	11			12	
Petty Theft / Possession	51	40	29	8	128	2	1	3	13	19	4	1	2	11	
Malicious Misch/Vandal	5	3	5		13	2	2	2	2	8	2	2		7	
Other Crimes	29	12	4	4	49	5	5		1	11	10	4	1	22	
Status Offense - Runaway	66	6	1		73	10				11	15			15	
Status Offense - Other	11	1	3		15	2	3		5	10	2			7	
Missing Persons	10	1			11					0				0	
Subtotal	201	64	36	21	322	25	1	13	15	54	54	6	8	21	89
% of Total	62.4%	19.9%	11.2%	6.5%	100.0%	46.3%	1.9%	24.1%	27.8%	100.0%	60.7%	6.7%	9.0%	23.6%	100.0%
% of gang involvement for Non-Part I crime					69.2%					11.6%					19.1%
GRAND TOTAL	230	95	56	29	410	32	7	22	56	117	61	26	20	62	169
% of gang involvement for all crime					58.9%					16.8%					24.3%

Table 2. Female juvenile involvement in delinquent acts by number of accomplices and street gang affiliation

FBI PART I CRIME	NO GANG INVOLVEMENT				POSSIBLE GANG INVOLVEMENT				DEFINITE GANG INVOLVEMENT				CRIME		% OF		
	Accomplices 0	1	2	3+	Total	0	1	2	3+	Total	0	1	2	3+	Total	SUBTOTAL	GRAND TOTAL
Homicide	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Rape	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0.0%	
Robbery	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4.5%	0.3%	
Assault	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	9.1%	0.6%	
Burglary	3	9	1	13	25	0	0	1	1	1	1	14	14	14	63.6%	4.2%	
Theft - Vehicle	2	2	1	5	10	2	1	1	4	4	0	4	4	4	18.2%	1.2%	
Theft - Larceny	1	1	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	4.5%	0.3%	
Arson	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0.0%	
Subtotal	5	11	1	17	35	2	1	0	1	4	1	1	1	3	22	100.0%	6.5%
% of all total	29.4%	64.7%	5.9%	77.3%	100.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	100.0%	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	100.0%	13.6%	100.0%
% of gang involvement for Part I crime																	
NON-PART I CRIME																	
Drug Offense	3	1	1	5	11	1	1	1	3	6	0	6	6	6	1.9%	1.8%	
Alcohol Offense	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.3%	0.3%	
Weapons Offense	2	2	0	4	8	1	1	2	4	4	0	4	4	4	0.3%	0.3%	
Warrant/Probation	43	27	4	74	154	2	4	4	10	16	2	4	8	16	1.3%	1.2%	
Petty Theft / Possession	2	2	4	8	16	1	1	1	3	6	4	4	8	8	28.0%	26.2%	
Malicious Misch/Vandal.	2	2	0	4	8	0	0	1	1	2	1	3	3	3	1.0%	0.9%	
Other Crimes	12	2	3	17	34	3	3	1	7	14	1	21	21	21	6.7%	6.3%	
Status Offense - Runaway	120	15	2	137	274	21	17	4	42	84	10	3	13	173	55.1%	51.5%	
Status Offense - Other	15	2	0	17	34	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0.0%	
Missing Persons	198	47	7	252	504	19	4	3	25	51	4	1	3	25	5.4%	5.1%	
Subtotal	75.9%	18.0%	2.7%	83.1%	100.0%	67.9%	14.3%	10.7%	71.1%	100.0%	68.0%	16.0%	4.0%	12.0%	100.0%	8.0%	100.0%
% of gang involvement for Non-Part I crime																	
GRAND TOTAL	203	58	8	269	538	30	4	3	37	74	18	4	2	24	336	8.3%	100.0%
% of gang involvement for all crime																	

individuals (both males and females) were responsible. Using restrictive gang identification, this proportion was 19.1%; using the inclusive gang identification, this proportion was 33.3%. Thus, the overall proportion of delinquency attributable to gang-involved individuals probably lies somewhere between these values.

Assuming individuals who committed these offenses were not likely to do so without the influence of membership in the gang (as suggested by Thornberry, et al., 1995; Battin et al., 1998), then a large share of delinquency could be prevented by reducing membership in gangs. Based on the assumption that gang-involved individuals would not engage in delinquency without the influence of the gang, it is possible that up to 33% of juvenile involvement in delinquency could be reduced by eliminating youth participation in gangs. This finding is much lower than that reported by the Rochester Youth Development Study (Loeber, Huizinga, & Thornberry, 1996). In Rochester, 65% of overall delinquency was attributed to gang members. However, the Rochester report states that 30% of juveniles questioned from a general population sample claimed gang membership. It is possible that gang membership in that study is overstated. A possible motivation for youth to state that they are a “member of a street gang or posse,” when in fact they are not, may be because of the high social regard that many youth express for gang members. Although there is almost no research documenting this social regard, field experience supports this idea, and it appears to be an emerging theme in gang research currently in progress among American Indians (Armstrong, 1997).

Gang-involved delinquency: groups

Of the total incidents of juvenile involvement in delinquency, males with definite gang involvement who acted with 3 or more accomplices accounted for 8.9% of incidents involving

male suspects. Female suspects with definite gang involvement who acted with 3 or more accomplices accounted for only .01% of incidents involving female suspects. The second research question concerned the proportion of total incidents of juvenile involvement for which gang-involved groups (with 3 or more accomplices) was responsible. The overall proportion of delinquency attributable to gang groups was found to be between 5.7% and 12.1%. By comparison, it was found that these proportions were very similar to those of individuals with gang involvement who acted alone (7.1% - 12.7%). Thus, gang involved individuals are just as likely to commit offenses alone as in a group. This finding seems to give rise to the importance of focusing upon individual behavior, rather than describing and controlling gang crime committed only in group contexts.

Nongang-involved delinquency: groups

Of the total incidents of juvenile involvement in delinquency, males with no gang involvement who acted with 3 or more accomplices accounted for 4.2% of incidents involving male suspects. Female suspects with no gang involvement who acted with 3 or more accomplices accounted for only 2.7% of incidents involving female suspects. The third research question concerned the proportion of total incidents of juvenile involvement for which nongang-involved groups were responsible. Nongang groups were found to be involved in 3.7% of incidents. This proportion was vastly smaller than delinquent acts committed by nongang individuals (42.0%). Thus, the practical importance in considering nongang groups in reducing overall delinquency does not appear to be of great importance.

Gang involvement and ethnicity

The fourth research question concerned relationships between gang involvement and ethnicity. For both restrictive and inclusive gang identifications, the difference between ethnic groups

and gang involvement was large. Table 3 shows a significant relationship between ethnicity and gang involvement (χ^2 (df = 6, N = 1,032) = 73.1, $p < .001$; Cramer's V = .19). Thus, Asians and Latinos are more likely than Whites to be involved with gangs. Of course, it should be noted that the unit of analysis here is individual involvement, not individuals; thus, these cases contain some proportion of repeat offenders. The finding that gang involvement was related to ethnicity is consistent with common knowledge about gang membership: that gang membership is found chiefly among minority groups. However, the proportions were computed for purposes of making comparisons among minority groups. It was found that proportions of gang membership across minority (non-White) categories were very similar. Asian definite gang involvement was 24.8%, and the cumulative possible involvement was 43.6%. Latino definite gang involvement was 21.7% and cumulative possible involvement was 38.8%. These were far greater than majority (White) gang involvement, which was 8.3% definite gang involvement and 14.2% cumulative possible involvement.

An additional analysis was performed to check the difference between ethnic groups and number of accomplices. This result was similar to that of gang involvement in that multiple accomplices for Asian cases (9.2% for cases involving two accomplices, and 22.5% for cases involving three or more accomplices), and Latino cases (15.8% for cases involving two accomplices, and 14.8% for cases involving three or more accomplices) were greater than White gang involvement, which was 6.9% for cases with two accomplices, and 8.3% for cases with more accomplices. See Table 4 for a detailed description of number of accomplices and ethnicity.

Table 3
Gang Offenses by Ethnicity

	No gang involvement	Possible gang involvement	Definite gang involvement	Total
Asian	228 56.4%	76 18.8%	100 24.8%	404 100.0%
Latino	186 61.2%	52 17.1%	66 21.7%	304 100.0%
White	248 85.5%	17 5.9%	24 8.3%	289 100.0%
Other	26 74.3%	2 5.7%	7 20.0%	35 100.0%
Total	688 66.7%	147 14.2%	197 19.1%	1032 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 73.1$ (df = 6), $p < .001$.

Table 4
Number of Accomplices by Ethnicity

	Acted alone	One accomplice	Two accomplices	Three or more accomplices	Total
Asian	204 50.5%	72 17.8%	37 9.2%	91 22.5%	404 100.0%
Latino	165 54.3%	46 15.1%	48 15.8%	45 14.8%	304 100.0%
White	176 60.9%	69 23.9%	24 8.3%	20 6.9%	289 100.0%
Other	19 54.3%	7 20.0%	2 5.7%	7 20.0%	35 100.0%
Total	564 54.7%	194 18.8%	111 10.8%	163 15.8%	1032 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 46.9$ (df = 9), $p < .001$.

Inter-Ethnic Group Comparisons

Inter-ethnic category comparisons were made for gang delinquency, and gang and nongang groups. All inter-ethnic proportions were computed using the total sample as the denominator. These specific analyses are reported in narrative form, and do not relate to any tables presented in the text.

Gang-involved delinquency

When considering only incidents of delinquency involving males with definite gang involvement, Asians accounted for 12.6%, Latinos 8.5%, Whites 2.4% and Other 0.7%. When considering females with definite gang involvement, Asians accounted for 3.6%, Latinas and Whites 2.1% each, and Other 0.6%. To perform inter-ethnic comparisons, the proportion of total incidents of juvenile involvement for which gang-involved individuals were responsible (both males and females) was computed. As presented earlier, the proportion using the restrictive gang identification is reported first, followed by the proportion using the inclusive criterion. Inter-ethnic group comparisons of total incidents showed that Asians accounted for 9.7 to 17.1%, Latinos 6.4 to 11.4%, Whites 2.3 to 3.9%, and Other between 0.7 and 0.9%. Asian individuals were responsible for a greater proportion of overall delinquency than were Latinos or Whites.

Gang-involved delinquency: groups

When considering only individuals who fit the restrictive definition of gang involvement, and who acted with 3 or more accomplices, Asians accounted for 6.5%, Latinos 1.9%, Whites 0.3%, and Others 0.3%. When considering females with definite gang involvement, Asians accounted for 0.9%, Latinas 0.3%, Whites and Other 0.0% of incidents involving female suspects. The proportion of total incidents of delinquency with gang-involved groups (acting with 3 or more accomplices) was

computed. The overall proportion of delinquency attributable to Asian gang groups was 4.7 - 8.0%, Latinos 1.4 - 3.2%, Whites 0.2 - 0.7%, and Other 0.2 - 0.3%. By comparison, the proportion of delinquency attributable to Asian individuals with gang involvement who acted alone was 3.0 - 5.6%, Latino 2.9 - 4.6%, White 1.4 - 2.0%, and Other 0.4 - 0.5%. Thus, there was little difference between ethnic groups as to whether gang-involved individuals act alone or in groups.

Nongang-involved delinquency: groups

When considering only incidents of delinquency in which 3 or more nongang accomplices were involved, Asians accounted for 0.9%, Latinos 1.2%, Whites 1.3%, and Others 0.4%. Because these proportions were so small, analysis of gender differences provided no useful information. For comparison, the proportion of delinquency attributable to Asian individuals with no gang involvement who acted alone was 14.1%, Latinos 11.4%, Whites 15.0%, and Others 1.4%. Thus, there was little difference between ethnic groups as to whether nongang individuals acted alone or in groups.

Intra-Ethnic Group Comparisons

An additional analysis was performed to compare intra-ethnic group proportions of gang and nongang delinquency. The total number of incidents involving Asian youths was 404, Latinos, 304, Whites, 289, and 35 classified as Other. The "Other" category was not considered because of its small size. All intra-ethnic proportions were computed using the ethnic group total as the denominator.

Gang-involved delinquency

The question here is whether a difference exists among ethnic groups as to how much total delinquency is attributable to individuals with gang involvement. Of all incidents of delinquency involving Asians, individuals with gang involvement accounted for 18.8 - 24.8%. Of all incidents

involving Latinos, individuals with gang involvement accounted for 17.1 - 21.7%. Of all incidents involving Whites, individuals with gang involvement accounted for 5.9 - 8.3%. No significant difference was found between Asians and Latinos with regard to the proportion of total delinquency attributable to restrictive gang identification (χ^2 (df = 1, N = 580) = 1.3, n.s.) nor to the more inclusive gang identification (χ^2 (df = 1, N = 542) = .73, n.s.). Thus, a large share of delinquency is attributable to both Asian and Latino gang-involved individuals, with no significant differences between these ethnic categories.

Gang-involved delinquency: groups

To determine whether a difference exists within ethnic groups regarding how much delinquency was committed by gang groups, intra-group comparisons were conducted. The proportion of crime committed within a group context (3 or more accomplices) within each ethnic category was calculated. Of all gang incidents involving Asian youths, those occurring in a group context accounted for 11.9 - 20.3%. Of all incidents involving Latinos, 4.6 - 10.9% involved a group. Of Whites, the proportions were 0.7 - 2.4%. A significant difference (χ^2 (df = 1, N = 123) = 9.5, $p < .002$; Phi = .23) was found between Asians and Latinos with regard to the amount of total delinquency attributable to gang groups. Asians were much more likely to commit delinquent offenses with 3 or more accomplices than were Latinos.

In order to check whether this difference was also true for incidents of delinquency of gang-involved individuals who acted alone, similar proportions were computed. Of all gang incidents involving Asians, those involving a single individual accounted for 7.7 - 14.4%. Of all incidents involving Latinos, 9.7 - 15.5% acted alone. Of Whites, the proportions were 4.8 - 7.3%. There was

no significant difference (χ^2 (df = 1, N = 708) = .99, n.s.) between Asians and Latinos with regard to the amount of delinquency attributable to gang-involved individuals acting alone.

Nongang-involved delinquency: groups

Finally, differences within ethnic groups as to how much delinquency was committed by groups was examined. Intragroup comparisons were conducted to show the proportion of nongang delinquency committed within a group context within each ethnic category. Of all incidents involving nongang Asian youths, those occurring in a group context accounted for 2.2%. Of all incidents involving Latinos, 3.9% involved a group. For Whites, the proportion was 4.5%. There was no significant difference (χ^2 (df = 1, N = 285) = 1.2, n.s.) between Asians and Latinos with regard to the amount of delinquency attributable to nongang groups.

Strengths and Limitations

An important strength of study I is the use of a full year of crime data in a multi-cultural community. Reliable coding and detailed analysis of official data provides the best available information concerning the nature and extent of gang delinquency, especially serious offenses. Official records, though, are sometimes criticized for not capturing all minor offenses. Regardless, because there is a wide variation in geographic patterns of offender demographics and delinquent behaviors, the information in Study I alone is not easily generalized to other locations or time periods within Westminster.

Summary

The primary analyses centered on addressing four research questions. The following summary is organized around these questions.

What proportion of delinquency is committed by gang-involved individuals?

Gang-involved individuals were responsible for 19 - 33% of all delinquency. Thus, there is tremendous potential to reduce overall delinquency by eliminating the influence attributable to gangs, assuming that gang individuals would not otherwise commit delinquent offenses.

What proportion of delinquency is committed by gang groups?

Gang-involved groups of 3 or more accomplices were responsible for 6 - 12% of all delinquency. It was found that these proportions were very similar to those of gang-involved individuals who acted alone, and this similarity was observed for both Asian and Latino ethnic categories. Thus, gang-involved individuals were just as likely to commit offenses alone as in a group. Overall, gang delinquency involving 3 or more accomplices, and delinquent acts committed without accomplices were both very small proportions of total delinquency. Because the vast majority of gang delinquency was committed with only one or two accomplices, efforts toward reducing group delinquency may not prove to be the most efficient response to gang offenses.

What proportion of delinquency is committed by nongang groups?

Nongang groups were responsible for 4% of all delinquency. This proportion was vastly smaller than the 42% of delinquency committed by nongang individuals. The small proportion of delinquency by nongang groups indicates that focusing attention on this population is not of great practical importance in reducing overall delinquency.

What relationships exist between gang involvement and ethnicity?

It was noted above that gang members were responsible for up to 33% of total delinquent involvement of youth. Of this proportion, 17% was attributable to Asians, 11% to Latinos, and 4% to Whites. This finding indicates that there is a strong ethnicity factor at play. Although there are

exceptions, gang membership is an issue primarily among minority ethnic groups in Westminster. Additional analysis showed that Asians and Latinos were more likely than Whites to commit delinquency in groups of three or more accomplices.

Inter-group comparisons. A greater share of delinquency was attributable to Asians than to Latinos and Whites. However, this finding is not generalizable beyond these data because this result is only a proportion, not a population-adjusted rate. More important, no differences between ethnic categories were found as to whether gang-involved individuals engaged in delinquency alone or in groups, nor was there an ethnic difference as to whether nongang individuals acted alone or in

groups. Intra-group comparisons. Large proportions of delinquency were attributable to gang-involved individuals within minority ethnic groups. Gang-involved Asians were responsible for up to 25% of all delinquent acts committed by Asians. Gang-involved Latino individuals were responsible for up to 22% of all delinquent acts committed by Latinos. Gang-involved Whites were responsible for up to 8% of all delinquency committed by Whites.

Within-group differences were also found when analyzing gang delinquency committed in a group involving three or more accomplices. Asian gang groups were responsible for up to 20% of all Asian gang delinquency. Latino gang groups were responsible for up to 11% of all Latino gang delinquency. White gang groups were responsible for up to 2% of all White gang delinquency. However, no intragroup effect was found when the same analyses were conducted among incidents involving only one individual. Further, no intragroup effect was found between ethnic categories with regard to the amount of delinquency attributable to nongang groups.

STUDY II: EXPLANATIONS FOR GANG INVOLVEMENT

The goal of the second study was to examine social and psychological factors related to gang involvement. A focus group was conducted to plan areas of inquiry for subsequent interviews with gang-involved and nongang involved youth and their parents. Specific hypotheses and interview questions were constructed from the focus group information, and the small body of literature in this area. Data necessary to test specific hypotheses about gang involvement were then obtained from these interviews.

Focus Group

A focus group consisting of experts in the field was organized to obtain beliefs regarding plausible explanations as to why Vietnamese youth become involved in gangs. This information was needed to clearly define relevant areas of inquiry prior to conducting interviews with gang-involved youth themselves. Focus groups are more efficient than separate interviews because they allow investigators to interact directly with participants, and participants can react to and build upon responses of other group members. This approach was selected because of its flexibility, high face validity, speed, cost-effectiveness, and ability to capture rich information. Such features are of great value in the process of better understanding social problems.

Participants

Experts in Vietnamese culture, experts in gang and group behavior, and experienced professionals who work with gang youth were invited to discuss juvenile involvement in Vietnamese gangs. Specifically, the group consisted of 2 university professors with expertise in sociology, social psychology, and gangs (most notably Malcolm W. Klien, Ph.D.); 2 deputy probation officers, and 2 law enforcement officers who had extensive experience working with

Vietnamese gang youth; 1 expert in Vietnamese culture and family life; and 4 individuals who manage programs geared toward rehabilitating delinquent gang youth. In all, 11 individuals, 73% of whom were Vietnamese, participated fully in the group. No “ideal mix” of participants was attempted. Rather, a group dynamic most consistent with the research goal was sought. Additionally, the two principal investigators, a social psychologist and a criminologist, both of whom had the necessary background knowledge of the topic, followed up on critical areas of concern.

Procedure

Participants met for a period of two hours on four separate occasions. Each discussion was led by a moderator who was trained in group dynamics and skilled in conducting research interviews. The moderator was mild and unobtrusive, but maintained control over the group. He was also effective in maintaining the group’s enthusiasm and interest in the topic, and assured that the discussion went smoothly. The moderator did not know or select the participants, nor did he have a particular interest in the topic or the finding from the focus group. For these reasons, it is unlikely that the moderator’s presence served to bias the group discussion.

Each session began with a summary of the goals for the session, and a review of ground rules, and was guided by open-ended questions prepared in advance by the principal investigators. The moderator used pause and probe techniques to obtain thorough responses. Notes taken by the principal investigators and an assistant served as the primary record of the discussion. Voice recordings were also used as a reference to clarify ambiguous information found in the notes. A

summary of the discussions was presented to the group at the last session for any needed correction or clarification.

Results

Definitions of terms central to the discussion were explored, followed by these questions:

(1) Why do Vietnamese youth join gangs?, (2) Why do some youth choose not to join gangs?, (3) Why do some youth leave gangs?, (4) What risk factors influence gang membership?, and (5) What protective factors protect against gang membership?

Central Definitions

As there is no consensus in either academia or government as to the definition of the terms “street gang,” “gang crime” or “gang member,” the participants discussed the meaning of these terms to ensure that all participants were addressing the same topic. In spite of the absence of a consensus on the definition of these terms, focus group participants had no difficulty understanding what type of gang was being discussed as all had considerable knowledge and experience working with gang-involved individuals. Although participants felt they each had a clear understanding of what was meant by “Vietnamese gang,” a working definition very similar to Klein’s (1971) influential definition of a gang, was adopted. This definition is as follows: An identifiable group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent and negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies. Additionally, it was noted that most gangs are mono-ethnic, consist of minority ethnic group members (in this case, Vietnamese), have a code of loyalty, and are territorial (in this case,

territoriality is instrumental and limited to personal space and businesses or business districts, rather than residential and recreation areas). Although having its imperfections, this definition of a gang comes close to describing the kind of street gang discussed in this group (see Bursik & Grasmick, 1993 for debate on the definition of this term). Although tagger crews, skinheads and hate groups fit within Klein's definition, they were excluded from the focus group discussion because their offenses differ from those of street gangs.

Competing definitions of gang crime diverge on whether the offender is affiliated with a gang, or whether the motive for the offense benefits the gang. For this group, the affiliation definition was adopted because it is consistent with the California Penal Code. It does not preclude the motivation definition, and it is most suitable for research measurement because motives for crimes are often indeterminable or unrecorded. A gang member was defined as any individual who believes he is a member of a street gang, and whose membership is acknowledged by his own gang and/or members of other gangs. Thus, the discussion that took place was consistent with the layperson's understanding of what a street gang is. Gang crime was defined as any criminal offense that is committed by a member of a gang, and a gang member was defined as an individual who recognizes himself as a member of a street gang and whose membership is acknowledged by his own gang and/or members of other gangs.

Why do Vietnamese youth join gangs?

Several categories of possible reasons for gang membership were recorded: (1) To improve one's concept of self; (2) To ameliorate a struggle with cultural identity; (3) As a response to exposure to significant and negative life events; (4) To meet perceived economic needs; and (5) To obtain social benefits of gang membership.

Self Concept. Some Vietnamese youth may have a negative self concept because of their perceived low social status as refugees, and the negative stereotypes held by some Whites toward individuals of Vietnamese descent. Youth who see their ethnic background as a characteristic weakness may be susceptible to gang membership because gang involvement may promote a more positive self-image, such as one of power and prestige, thereby improving the self concept.

Cultural identity. Two explanations related to cultural identity were conveyed. The first concerned the distress caused by differing cultural preferences between parents and youth. Discord may arise in the parent-youth relationship when parents insist upon maintaining the Vietnamese language and cultural values, while youth maintain a strong preference for the English language and American cultural values. Youth may then find that involvement in a gang provides a sense of social support and belonging no longer found in the family.

Similarly, the second possibility involves the scenario in which youth reject their Vietnamese identity but are unable to adopt an American identity due to perceived barriers to identity acquisition (e.g., physical features, language barriers, etc.). Youth may find that involvement in a gang provides a cultural identity not found elsewhere.

Perceived Benefits. Some youth may perceive that there are benefits to be gained from involvement in gangs. These include the following: (a) social benefits of acceptance and support of a peer group; (b) financial gain; and (c) physical protection from enemies.

Why do some youth choose not to join gangs?

It was suggested that some youth may choose not to join gangs as a result of familial reinforcement of values contradictory to gang membership. Such families were described as structurally intact, having parents with effective parenting skills who effectively teach “life

lessons,” communicate moral values, promote good relationships among members, are culturally adapted to the majority culture, and meet youth needs of affect, affiliation, and individual identity. Other suggestions given for why some youth choose not to join gangs pertained to their individual characteristics. It was emphasized that youth who accept their Asian identity, possess a desire for legitimate means of status, disapprove of the stigma associated with being a gang member, or hold values that are contrary to gang membership are less likely to be interested in joining gangs. It was also noted that some youth may choose not to join gangs because their friends are not gang-involved. Finally, it was pointed out that youth do not join gangs when they reside in locations where there are none to join.

Why do some youth leave gangs?

It was suggested that some youth may leave gangs out of concern for their family, or out of concern for their own future. Concern for the family may arise through the realization that there are negative consequences for the family, such as guilt, shame, and possible physical harm. Concern for self may arise through maturation and the realization that there are serious consequences of gang membership. These consequences may include jeopardizing school, marriage, and legitimate means of attaining a respectable social status in the community. Additionally, ties to gangs may become less important over time if they fail to meet the expectations of the youth. It was also noted that some parents are successful at severing gang involvement by relocating the youth to an area free of gangs; enabling youth to engage in school or work opportunities. This is sometimes possible through an extended family network.

What risk factors influence gang membership?

The factors influencing gang membership centered on familial and social risk factors. Family risk factors pertained to families with the following features: absent or ineffective parents, poverty, unrealistic parental expectations of the youth, and parental resistance to adopting an American identity. It was also noted that some parents shun resources that could improve parenting skills (e.g., counseling) because of the cultural belief that it is shameful to talk about personal problems, especially with individuals outside of the family. Social risk factors were named as an inability to speak English that results in limited access to social circles that provide positive socialization, the lack of access to community recreation and social resources, and the lack of effective role models.

What factors protect against gang membership?

In our discussions on this question, Klein offered the suggestion that protective factors should not merely be the obverse of risk factors. For example, if we say that poor parenting is a risk factor, it does not add meaning to say that good parenting is a protective factor. Protective factors should be named as those occurring at some point in time before the risk factor. To take the same example, if poor parenting is a risk factor, then an effective adult mentor could be considered as a possible protective factor. In the focus group, the following potential protective factors were named: attending parenting classes to teach parents how to manage family problems to improve family functioning, providing youth access to social organizations, increasing school retention rates and presence of role models, providing adult supervision of youth when parents are unavailable, and re-establishing community concern regarding all youth at risk of gang involvement.

Research Hypotheses

Information concerning gang membership obtained from the extant literature and the focus group described above were used to develop specific and testable hypotheses of gang involvement. The determination of which hypotheses to test, which variables to examine, and how to measure these variables was based upon the priorities of the investigation, and upon the feasibility of the test. In all, five non-cultural and three cultural explanations of gang membership were selected.

Non-Cultural Explanations

The non-cultural explanations for gang membership may be categorized as theoretical and atheoretical. At minimum, a theory is a set of interrelated hypotheses or propositions concerning a phenomenon or a set of phenomena. The first three non-cultural hypotheses do not have a set of interrelated propositions, rather they are merely classifications of predictors. The next two hypotheses are founded on social science theory that is used to explain a wide variety of human behavior. As noted previously, others have already applied these two theories to gang membership.

Utilitarian Hypothesis. The utilitarian hypothesis states that youth who perceive the benefit of gang involvement to be greater than its cost will become involved in gangs. That is, youth who see more advantages than disadvantages to membership are more inclined to participate in gangs than youth who perceive the cost of involvement to be greater than the benefit.

Social Problems Hypothesis. The social problems hypothesis states that low socio-economic status together with low youth opportunities predict gang involvement. This means that youth from families with low income and education, who also have few after-school opportunities for social development (i.e., extra-curricular activities), are more inclined to participate in gangs than youth with high socioeconomic status and high opportunities.

Public Health Hypothesis. The public health hypothesis states that high gang risk factors and low gang protective factors predict gang involvement. In other words, youth with many gang involvement risk factors (e.g., pro-gang attitudes) and few protective factors (e.g., respected peers with anti-gang attitudes) will be more likely to participate in gangs than youth with few risk factors and high protective factors.

Social Development Hypothesis. The social development hypothesis states that social bond, social environment, and psychological development predict gang involvement. In this case, we defined social bond as being attached, committed, and involved with the family. Social environment assessed neighborhood safety and school safety, and the youth's attitude toward school and toward law enforcement. Psychological development pertained to the youths' ethnic integration, peer integration, self-esteem, and social acceptance. That is to say, youth who have a low social bond, poor social environment, and poor psychological development are more likely to participate in gangs than youth who have a good social bond, social environment, and psychological development.

Social Learning Hypothesis. The social learning hypothesis states that differential association and differential reinforcement predict gang involvement. We defined differential association as the difference in attitude toward gangs that youth and their parents have. The greater the difference in attitude between youth and parents, the greater the differential association. Differential reinforcement was defined as parents' reaction to youth being in a gang. That is, youth who have high differential association and high differential reinforcement are more likely to participate in gangs than those with low differential association and low differential reinforcement scores.

Cultural Explanations

The last three hypotheses are cultural explanations of gang membership. As these hypotheses have emerged from the focus group described above, they are too new, and as yet untested, to be classified as theories. However, they are more than classifications of predictors because they do consist of related propositions concerning gang involvement. In essence, they are theory candidates.

Cultural Rejection Hypothesis. The cultural rejection hypothesis states that rejection of Asian identity will predict gang membership when moderated by barriers to acquiring an American identity. In other words, when youth reject their Asian identity, and social barriers to obtaining an American identity are present, youth are more likely to join gangs than youth who reject their Asian identity but do not encounter barriers to acquiring an American identity.

Cultural Conflict Hypothesis. The cultural conflict hypothesis states that differential cultural identities between parents and youth will result in family conflict and subsequently predict gang involvement. We defined differential cultural identity as the difference in identity (American identity and Asian identity) between parents and youth. The greater the difference in identity between youth and parents, the greater the differential identity. Differential identity, in turn, will lead to family conflict and subsequent gang membership. This means that youth who possess or desire a very different identity than their parents will experience family conflict, and will be more likely to participate in gangs than youth who do not have a different cultural identity than their parents.

Cultural Marginalization Hypothesis. The cultural marginalization hypothesis states that low Asian identity and low American identity predict gang involvement. That is to say, youth who have a low Asian identity and a low American identity are more likely to be involved in a gang

than youth with either a high Asian identity or a high American identity, or youth high on both identities. This suggests that gangs may serve as an important source of social identity for youth.

Interviews

These hypotheses were then tested using information gathered through personal interviews. The interviews were conducted with gang-involved and nongang-involved Vietnamese youth and their parents. This method was chosen because personal interviews decrease “don’t know” and absent responses, provide opportunity for interviewers to clarify the meaning of questions when necessary, and facilitate elaboration of incomplete or ambiguous responses. Additionally, because examination of the above hypotheses required the collection of sensitive information, such as report of family conflict, cultural preferences, and gang involvement, control over the interview environment was necessary to guard against the possibility of responses being influenced by the presence of others.

Some research concerning gangs has utilized an approach whereby interviews are conducted at the doorstep or inside the home of the youth. This approach was not suitable for this project because interview responses could be easily influenced by the presence or possible interruption by parents or siblings in the home. Youth who may not want to discuss topics such as family conflict, cultural preferences, or gang involvement in the presence of their parents may falsify information given to interviewers. To avoid this likely possibility, all interviews were conducted at a community agency where youth and parents were interviewed separately. Separate interviews conducted in a controlled environment increased the likelihood that interviewees answered all questions honestly.

Schedule of Questions

Two interview schedules, one for parents and one for youth, were prepared. Each schedule was initially constructed in the English language, and subsequently translated into the Vietnamese language. Participants were given a choice as to which language they preferred. Questions for the interviews were organized into sections. The youth version consisted of 26 sections with between 2 to 56 questions per section. The parent version consisted of 23 sections with between 2 to 42 questions per section. The two versions were very similar; however, the parent version excluded items which pertain to school, friends, and delinquency, but included items relating to depression, anxiety, and cultural adaptation. For the vast majority of measures, no published scales were available, and original scales were constructed. In some instances, existing scales were incorporated, modified, and shortened as necessary. Specific measurement of all constructs is summarized later.

Procedure

Families were initially contacted by telephone, provided with a brief description of the study, and invited to be interviewed. A \$10 gift certificate from a popular grocery store was provided as an incentive for participation. If the invitation was accepted, an appointment was scheduled at one of two Vietnamese community agencies. The location and time of the interview was determined by the preference of the parent and the availability of the site. On average, interviews lasted approximately 1 hour.

Each interview was conducted anonymously. Upon scheduling an interview appointment, the scheduler used an identification number to record the scheduled appointment. The interviewer was not provided with the identity of any participants in this project. At the

conclusion of all interviews, the scheduler's list of participant names and identification numbers was destroyed. Thus, it was impossible to link any interview answer to specific individuals. All procedures used were planned and reviewed in advance by an independent human subjects review committee.

Interviewer Training

Bilingual interviewers were recruited on the basis of their skill and experience relevant to interviewing tasks. The eight interviewers were trained in standard research interview techniques by the principal investigators. The 20 hour training course included a description of the study, interview guidelines and procedures, and interview practice. In a group setting, interviewers were informed of the appropriate appearance and demeanor required for this project. Emphasis was placed upon the neutral effect their presence must have in the data collection process. Interviewers were instructed to follow question order and wording exactly. Much time was devoted to practicing the correct use of the question schedule to ensure proper use of contingency questions and adherence to other instructions. Interviewers were taught how to record both closed-ended and open-ended responses, and how and when to offer explanatory and clarifying comments in order to manage difficult or confusing situations. Demonstration interviews were performed by the principal investigators, followed by pairing off of the trainees to practice interviewing with each other. After the practice session, interviewers pointed out problem areas and some of their suggestions were incorporated into the final version of the interview schedule. Interview schedules were reviewed by the project staff, and the errors found were brought to the attention of the interviewers. By the end of the training period, all interviewers had become fully familiar with the schedule of questions and its proper use.

Population

The study population was defined as juvenile Vietnamese males living in or near the Little Saigon area of Westminster, California. Male juveniles were selected because of their prevalence in gang involvement and delinquency reported in Study I. However, 37 females were interviewed because they were inadvertently selected in the scheduling procedure. These interviews were not analyzed in the present report, but are available for later analysis. Because the names of all juvenile Vietnamese males were not known, a random sample of the population was not possible. In order to compile a sample that was representative of both gang-involved and nongang-involved youth (necessary for hypothesis testing), multiple sources were utilized to obtain project participants. These sources included one high school and three middle schools where student names were obtained from rosters. School rosters were used because a general population sample was desired. Moreover, participants selected through school samples are believed to be a good source of gang information (McConnell, 1994). Names of juvenile suspects and victims were obtained from official records of police departments in two cities, and other sources of official gang intelligence information (including the General Reporting Evaluation and Tracking system). Names obtained from law enforcement sources were checked against the school rosters. Only names which did not appear on the rosters were counted as law enforcement sources.

Sample

At least one parent of every individual on these lists (1,124, in all) was contacted at home by telephone by a bilingual scheduler. Of these contacts, 112 (10%) parents were unable to participate, 629 (56%) were unwilling to participate; and 383 (34%) made an appointment to be

interviewed with their child. Of those who made an appointment, 270 (70%) kept their appointment, and were interviewed. The final sample for the present analysis consisted of 233 Vietnamese parent and male child pairs (466 interviews). The referral sources for these cases were as follows: 137 (59%) public school roster; 68 (29%) police report; 16 (7%) participant referral; 12 (5%) law enforcement intelligence list. The median age of parents was 45 years. Male and female parents were equally likely to volunteer to be interviewed, and all chose to be interviewed in the Vietnamese language. Among these families, the median number of individuals living in the household was six and the reported household income was \$1,500 per month. This value is 44% of the median household income in Westminster reported in the decennial 1990 U.S. census. The reported monthly income level is likely, on average, an underestimation of actual income. It has been suggested that this may be the result of a cultural preference to under-report personal assets. The median age of youth participants was 15 years, and 61% preferred to be interviewed in the English language. A summary of the demographics of the sample is provided in Table 7. Information describing youth gang involvement and delinquency is provided later.

Recruitment

Scheduling and interviewing took place between July, 1996 and June, 1997. A letter appealing for participation was prepared to introduce the project to potential participants. This letter, prepared in both the Vietnamese language and the English language, was sent under the auspices of the City of Westminster, Department of Community Services. The approach taken was one which expressed the need for interview information in order to develop programs for families in the Vietnamese

Table 7
Demographic Characteristics of Parents and Youth

	Parents	Youth
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	55%	100%
Female	45%	0%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Vietnamese	100%	100%
<i>Language of Interview</i>		
Vietnamese	100%	39%
English	0%	61%
<i>Median Age</i>	45	15
<i>Median Years in U.S.</i>	7	5
<i>Median Income (monthly)</i>	\$1,500	---
<i>Median People in Household</i>	6	---

Note: The final sample consisted of 233 pairs of parents and youths.

community. After approximately three days had passed (enough time passed for the letter to reach the family by mail) a telephone call was initiated by the scheduler.

Scheduling interviews proved to be an arduous task. Each telephone call required a great amount of time and effort to thoroughly explain the project and address concerns expressed by the parent. Many telephone calls lasted up to 10 to 15 minutes. Moreover, it frequently took repeated contacts to reach the parent, or to give the potential participant time to consider the invitation.

As stated earlier, two Vietnamese community centers served as interview sites. The participants' perception of an agency proved to be a great assistance on some occasions, and on other occasions, it proved to be a hindrance in scheduling the interview. Many parents seemed to have strong positive or negative feelings toward various agencies. The availability of two

centers, however, proved to be a good strategy in increasing the participation.

Periodic meetings with schedulers yielded information that provided insight into both the nature of the present sample and the ways in which future data collection efforts could be improved. One reason for refusal to participate was suspicion about the purpose of the interview. Some fearful individuals were willing to be interviewed over the telephone, but not in person. However, telephone interviews were not acceptable because control over the interview environment would be lost. Some indecision regarding participation is attributable to the fact that most Vietnamese American adults are not accustomed to being questioned or interviewed by social scientists.

Another reason for not wishing to participate is a lack of motivation. Possible benefits for the “Vietnamese community” was one message used to increase participation. However, some individuals revealed that they did not feel part of the community, and had no interest in it. This seemed to be especially true for adults who had been living in the United States for many years. Still others expressed resentment toward the community, stating that because they themselves had not benefitted from membership in the community, there was no reason for them to put forth effort for the benefit of the community.

Many parents declined to be interviewed because they felt too busy with work and childcare schedules. Other parents agreed to participate, but their children were unwilling. We declined the few offers we received to interview parents without their children, and the few offers to interview children without their parents. This was because the project required data from both parties to yield a complete case for analysis. Analysis using list-wise deletion of cases containing missing data would have omitted all partial cases from analysis.

In general, the initial contact letter appealing for participation to “help the community” was met with skepticism. In fact, midway through the project, this approach was abandoned in favor of using the telephone method to make the initial attempt. Parents were most responsive when they believed there might be a personal and immediate benefit from the interview. Many individuals did not want to participate, but instead of directly declining, they would initiate a series of return calls between the scheduler and the family that ultimately led to no further contact. It is believed that parents engaged in this behavior when they felt it was impolite to directly decline participation.

The present sample likely consists of parents who are, in general, more trusting of the stated purposes of the interview than other parents, and who believe they might derive some benefit from the interview. This benefit was not necessarily the gift of the \$10 grocery certificate. A number of parents declined the gift when presented with it, and suggested that it be given to more needy families. Thus, the sample is biased against families in which parents were unwilling or unable to persuade their child to cooperate.

Schedulers suggested that similar research projects should be sponsored by a trusted source (in this case, we found that the City of Westminster, Department of Community Services had credibility with most parents) and announced in advance through credible newspaper and radio media. A trusted source providing advance notice may help legitimize survey research projects and reduce skepticism concerning research motives. Schedulers also felt that if the interview was somehow tied to their children’s education, parents would be much more responsive, as education is very important to Vietnamese parents. Moreover, schedulers believed that if interviewers were to make the initial contact and interview at the participants’ home (this

was not possible in the present project because both parent and child were to be interviewed separately under controlled conditions), if interviewers were to tell the parents exactly how much time the interview would take, and if interviewers were to specify how much money they would receive at the conclusion of the interview, that parental participation might be increased.

Dependent Variables: Gang Involvement

Gang involvement is typically measured through a single self-report question such as “Are you a member of a gang or posse? –yes or no.” This approach assumes a dichotomy in gang membership –an assumption challenged in this project. We view gang involvement on a continuum that might range from knowing a gang member to being a leader of a gang. This view is consistent with that of researchers who have suggested that there are different degrees of gang affiliation including full, peripheral, temporary, and situational participation (Klein, 1971; Cartwright, Tomson, & Schwartz, 1975; Vigil, 1988a), all of which indicate diversity in intensity and duration of gang involvement. The range of involvement may include many possibilities such as knowing several gang members well; spending leisure time with gang members; holding confidences of some gang members; having gang members as friends; relying on close friendships with gang members; partial participation in some illegal gang activity; full, but inconsistent participation in gang activities; considering oneself as a gang member; full participation in all gang activities; to, perhaps, a leadership role in a street gang. Dichotomous gang “membership” questions, such as the one above, only capture individuals who identify themselves as gang members. It may not capture individuals who are involved in gang activity, but do not consider themselves to be a “member” of a gang. This may be especially important when examining gang involvement among juveniles who may not have developed a distinct individual identity as a gang

“member,” but who are involved with gangs, to some extent, nonetheless.

It was therefore thought useful to devise an original measure to identify individuals who are involved in gangs, but who do not label themselves as a gang member. The approach used was one that acknowledged the importance of social relationships among gang members. Because gangs are a social phenomenon, it was important to measure the level of social involvement youth have with individuals in a gang. That is, we intended to measure the centrality of gangs in the social life of the youth. Figure 1 contains a hypothetical illustration of the continuum of gang involvement, the amount of gang involvement captured by traditional means of gang identification, and the amount captured by the social centrality measure we devised.

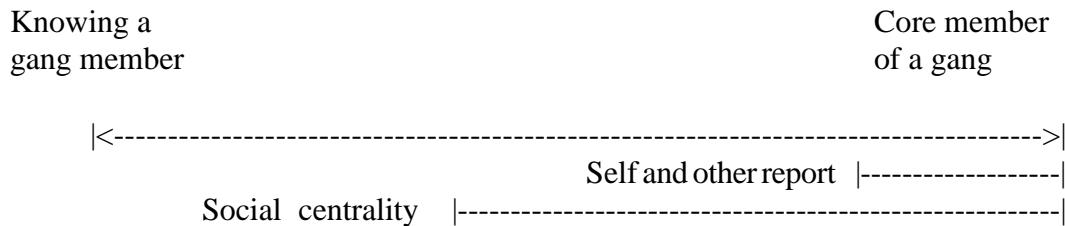


Figure 1. Possible continuum of gang involvement and hypothetical measurement of gang involvement captured by traditional measures and the social centrality measure.

Traditional Measure of Gang Involvement

In the present study, the traditional measure of gang involvement refers to the use of self-report and criminal justice sources. The self-report was obtained through asking the following series of “yes” or “no” questions: 1) “Is there a group of friends that you hang around with a lot?”; and, if yes, 2) “Does that mean that you are in a gang?” Youth who responded yes to both of these questions were coded as gang-involved. Additionally, youth whose name appeared in

any of the following three law enforcement information sources, the General Reporting Evaluation and Tracking (GREAT) System, law enforcement crime records, and law enforcement gang intelligence files, were classified as gang-involved. These traditional means of gang identification likely underestimate the number of gang-involved juveniles because at an early age, youth are less likely to be fully involved in gang activity. In the present sample, the average age of youths was 15.3 years. These youths may not have been involved in enough gang activities to identify themselves as gang members or to be identified in a criminal justice source. Using this measure, 29 (12.0%) of the juveniles in the sample were classified as gang-involved.

Social Centrality - Dichotomous

The social centrality measure classified youth as gang-involved if they declared having close interpersonal relationships with gang members. The following series of questions were administered to obtain a social centrality measure: 1) “Whom do you go to if you have a problem you want to talk about?”; 2) “Who accepts you totally, including both your worst and your best points?”; and 3) “Whom can you really count on to care about you, regardless of what is happening to you?” Youth were instructed to answer these three items by giving the initials of each person who came to mind. Later in the interview, after the topic of gangs had been introduced, the interviewer turned back to the pages where the first three questions appeared, and asked; 4) “How many of these people are involved in a gang?” For the fourth question, youths were asked to give the number of people, out of the total listed from questions 1 - 3, who are gang-involved. Youth who declared one or more “gang members” in their core social support network were classified as gang-involved. Using this measure, 83 (36%) of the juveniles in the sample were classified as gang-involved.

In order to illustrate the relationship among the various gang identification approaches, a Venn diagram was prepared (See Figure 2). The diagram includes an additional method of gang identification, self-report of personal involvement in a gang fight, which was not used in either the traditional or social centrality measure. It is included in the Venn diagram as a possible validity check. The diagram shows that the social centrality measure identifies many of the same cases that traditional measures identify, as well as 52 additional cases. This is especially important among juveniles who, because of their young age, may not have had enough opportunity to be identified as gang-involved by official sources. The description of delinquency of youth in the sample, and the hypothesis testing section to follow were performed using both the traditional and social centrality measures of gang involvement.

As a check on the validity of the social centrality variable, we compared the mean social centrality score between those who claimed they were in a gang based upon self-report to those who claimed they were not gang-involved. If the social centrality variable captures gang members, one would expect the score to be higher for those who identified themselves as a gang member than those who did not identify themselves as a gang member. A comparison of means using the *t*-test showed that self-reported gang-involved youth had a higher social centrality mean score than those who did not identify themselves as gang-involved ($t(df=13) = -5.7, p<.00$). The means were .91 and .36, respectively. Thus, the social centrality score results are consistent with self-report of gang identification.

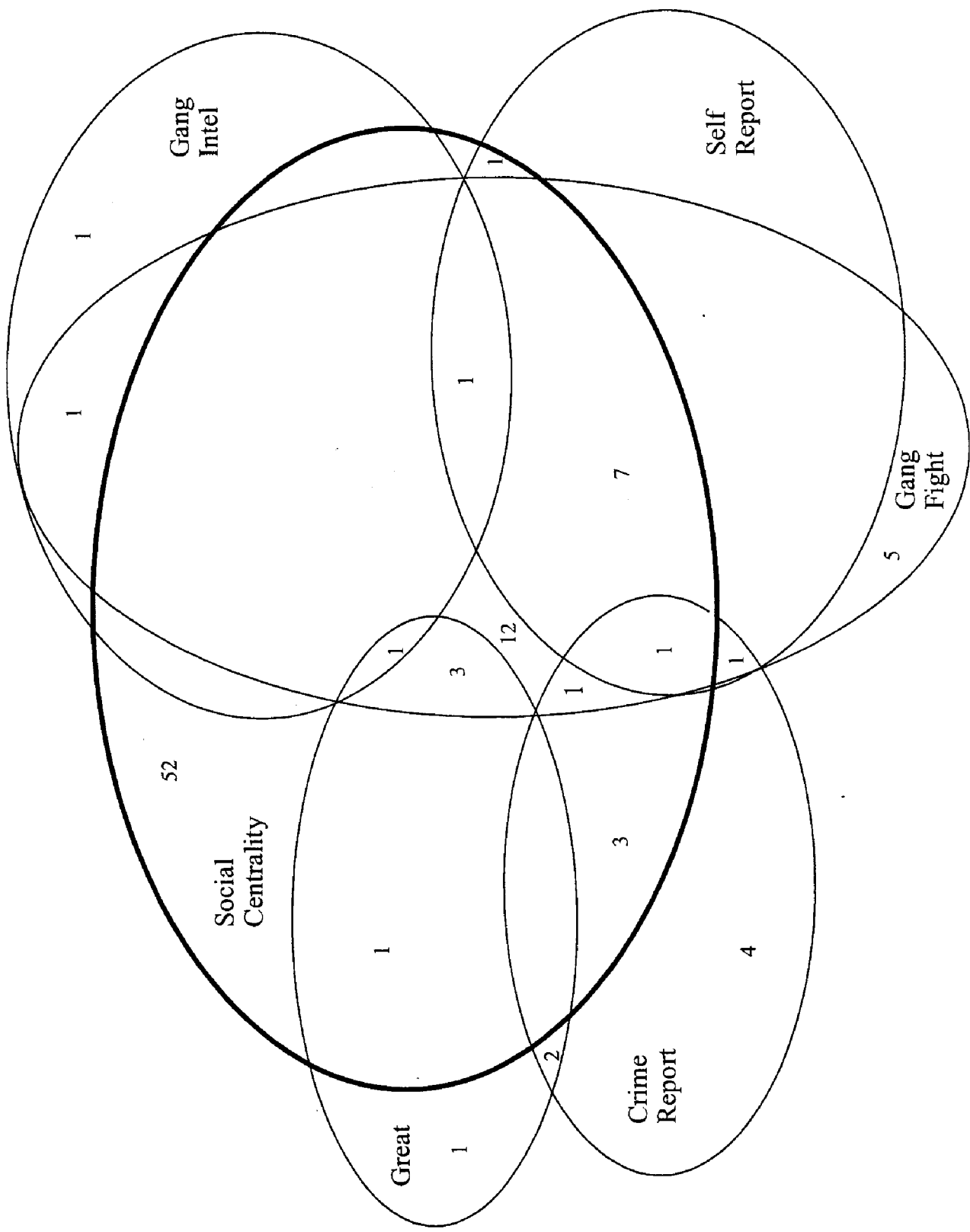


Figure 2. Venn Diagram of Sources of Gang Identification.

Social Centrality - Continuous

A continuous measure of social centrality was obtained by computing the proportion of close relationships youth have with gang-involved individuals out of their total number of close relationships.

The greater the value, the greater the proportion of close relationships involving gang members.

This measure yielded hypothesis-testing results similar to that of the dichotomous social centrality measure. The dichotomous analyses are reported as a matter of convenience because the traditional measure of gang involvement is also dichotomous.

Delinquency and Gang Involvement

A comparison was made between the gang delinquency captured by each of the two methods of gang identification. This comparison was made to explore the similarities and differences between the self-report delinquency of youth captured by each gang identification method. For each delinquent offense category, the proportion of individuals who committed at least one offense in each category during the past year was computed. Specific delinquency questions were adapted from the National Youth Survey (see Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1986). The traditional method identified youth who were involved in a greater level of delinquency than those identified by the social centrality measure. This is likely due to the fact that those at the far right of the continuum of gang involvement are more likely to be involved in delinquency than those individuals closer to the center of the continuum of gang involvement. The sample contains an adequate representation of delinquent gang youth.

Table 8
Percent who committed at least one offense in the past year

Offense	# of Items	Traditional Gang Identification		Social Centrality Gang Identification	
		No gang involvement n=204	Gang involvement n=29	No gang involvement n=143	Gang involvement n=83
Violent	10	27.0%	69.0%	19.6%	53.0%
Property	13	47.5%	89.7%	40.6%	73.5%
Status	3	37.3%	82.8%	32.9%	60.2%
Drug use	9	8.8%	58.6%	7.7%	27.7%
Drug sale	3	2.9%	10.3%	1.4%	8.4%
Alcohol	3	16.2%	69.0%	10.5%	45.8%
Other	13	38.2%	89.7%	28.0%	72.3%

Note: Offense items ranged in severity. For example, violent offenses includes responses to questions “Have you ever hit someone with the idea of hurting him or her?” and “Have you ever fired a gun from a car at people?”

Plan of Analysis

The relationship between predictor variables and the dependent variables was examined using logistic regression. For each hypothesis, the dependent variables were dichotomous--they had only two values, gang-involved or nongang-involved. Logistic regression was used because this statistical technique is designed primarily for analysis situations requiring a dichotomous dependent variable (Wright, 1994). Further, logistic regression was utilized because of its advantages: it does not produce negative predicted probabilities, and the predictors do not have to be normally distributed, linearly related, or contain equal variances within each group (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996).

Independent variable scale scores were obtained by computing the mean of all scale items. For constructs in which many variables were available, factor analysis was used for scale

construction purposes. This procedure yields large amounts of information. Thus, given the large number of scales in the study, the factor results are not reported. However, the internal consistency of all scales was computed using Cronbach's Alpha. This value is reported and interpreted for all scales containing 5 or more items. For scales containing fewer items (e.g., mentoring, and school attitude), the internal consistency was not computed because one would not expect scales with so few items to achieve internal reliability.

Non-Cultural Hypotheses

Utilitarian Hypothesis

The utilitarian hypothesis states that gang involvement can be explained by the balance of benefits and costs of gang involvement. Specifically, greater perceived gang benefits than perceived costs will predict gang involvement.

Perceived Benefits of Gang Involvement. To measure the perceived benefits of being in a gang, fifteen items pertaining to the appeal of gang involvement were constructed. Each item was preceded by the question, "Why do you think that kids join gangs?" Following each item was a five-point Likert scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree," and 5 representing "strongly agree." The same five-point response scale was used for all remaining scales, unless otherwise noted. The perceived benefit items were similar to the following: "To get a good reputation" and "For support and loyalty." A greater mean value on this measure indicates more perceived benefits of gang involvement than a lower mean value. Based upon the mean scores obtained from youth responses, Cronbach's alpha was .96, indicating that the measure is internally consistent.

Perceived Barriers to Gang Involvement. Eight items were used to assess the perceived reasons for staying out of gangs. The items were preceded by the question, "For some kids,

joining a gang just isn't worth it. Why do you think kids stay out of gangs?" The items included the following: "Because being in a gang would hurt their family" and "Because gang members ruin their own lives." A greater mean value on this measure indicates greater perceived barriers--reasons for staying out of gangs--than a lower mean value. Based upon the mean scores obtained from youth responses, Cronbach's alpha was .84 indicating that this measure was also quite reliable.

Benefits over Barriers. A variable representing the balance of perceived benefits and perceived barriers was obtained by computing the mean score for the barriers to gang involvement measure and subtracting it from the mean score computed for the benefits of gang involvement measure. The higher the positive value on this score, the greater the benefits over the barriers. The greater the negative value on this score, the greater the barriers over the benefits.

Results. The correlations between the benefits over barriers score with the dependent variables can be found in the correlation matrix labeled Table 9. All other correlations used in testing the non-cultural hypotheses can be found there as well. Using logistic regression, it was found that benefits over barriers does not contribute to the prediction of gang membership using either the traditional measure of gang involvement or the social centrality measure. Youth with high benefits over barriers scores are not more likely to be involved in gangs than youth with lower scores. The logistic regression results for this hypothesis, and all other non-cultural hypotheses, can be found in Table 10.

Social Problems Hypothesis

The social problems hypothesis suggests that factors of socioeconomic status and opportunity can explain gang involvement. Specifically, it was suggested that low income and low education level of parents, together with low opportunities for youth, predict gang involvement.

Table 9
Non-Cultural Hypotheses: Variable Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1) Benefits over Barriers												
2) SES X Youth Opportunities	-.08											
3) Neighborhood Gangs	.36***	.06										
4) Gang Attitude	.47***	-.07	.46***									
5) Family Support	-.10	.02	.03	-.13*								
6) Family Conflict	.22**	.06	.29***	.46***	-.32***							
7) Adult Mentor	-.24***	-.04	-.03	-.15*	.15*	-.21**						
8) Achievement Motivation	-.14*	.04	-.13*	-.30***	.16*	-.24***	.11					
9) School Attitude	-.25***	-.08	-.30***	-.32***	.10	-.32***	.23**	.34***				
10) Control	-.21**	-.07	-.24***	-.31***	.14*	-.43***	.12	.15*	.22**			
11) Anomia	.30***	.09	.26***	.41***	-.10	.45***	-.19**	-.18**	-.25***	-.33***		
12) Delinquency	.33***	-.06	.49***	.63***	.00	.42***	-.15*	-.33***	-.33***	-.22**	.35***	
13) Commitment to Family	.21**	-.04	.33***	.37***	-.28***	.73***	-.15*	-.11	-.26***	-.36***	.33***	.32***
14) Peer Integration	.08	-.04	-.16*	-.10	-.05	.10	-.04	-.04	.08	-.07	-.03	-.12

Note. Number of cases range from 204 to 233. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.
 (Table 9 continued on next page)

(Table 9 continued from previous page)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
15) Neighborhood Safety	.08	.04	.29***	.01	-.03	.13	.03	-.03	-.11	-.24***	.06	-.06
16) School Safety	.00	.13	.04	.06	-.10	.26***	-.04	-.07	-.09	-.34***	.00	.05
17) Police Attitude	.44***	-.03	.46***	.49***	-.17*	.35***	-.15*	-.36***	-.30***	-.21**	.44***	.53***
18) Self-Esteem	-.00	-.19**	-.05	-.18**	.21**	-.46***	.20**	.13	.20**	.40***	-.42***	-.08
19) Adult Approval	-.31***	.06	-.21**	-.31***	-.04	-.17**	.06	.03	-.01	.11	-.21**	-.32***
20) Parent Reaction	-.37***	.01	-.22**	-.21**	.16*	-.20**	.25***	.04	.07	.10	-.18**	-.20**
21) Differential Reinforcers	.81***	-.08	.32***	.35***	-.01	.10	-.11	-.02	-.14*	-.18**	.18**	.27***
22) Punishers Index	-.65***	.05	-.22**	-.36***	.15*	-.25***	.23***	.22**	.27***	.10	-.26***	-.23***
23) Traditional Measure	.28***	-.03	.53***	.41***	.02	.22**	-.05	-.15*	-.18**	-.17**	.21**	.41***
24) Social Centrality	.14*	-.04	.23***	.32***	.03	.14*	-.14*	-.20**	-.25***	-.11	.19**	.53***

Note. Number of cases range from 204 to 233. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(Table 9 continued on next page)

(Table 9 continued from previous page)

Variable	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
14) Peer Integration	.00											
15) Neighborhood Safety	.13	.04										
16) School Safety	.19**	.18**	.23***									
17) Police Attitude	.25***	.00	.09	.08								
18) Self-Esteem	-.30***	.01	-.27***	-.25***	-.14*							
19) Adult Approval	-.16***	.06	.17*	.10	-.31***	-.01						
20) Parent Reaction	-.21**	.11	.01	.06	-.22**	.09	.13*					
21) Differential Reinforcers	.14*	.08	.01	.01	.31***	.05	-.33***	-.12				
22) Punishers Index	-.20**	-.02	-.12	.02	-.35***	.06	.10	.46***	-.09			
23) Traditional Measure	.23***	-.08	.07	.05	.33***	.01	-.27***	-.21**	.21**	-.22**		
24) Social Centrality	.02	-.06	-.09	.01	.30***	-.05	-.11	-.12	.09	-.12	.22**	

Note. Number of cases range from 204 to 233. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

family income and years of education. The interaction of family income and parental education is a commonly used measure of SES. Family income was obtained by asking parents the following question: “If the pay earned by everyone in your family was added together for one month, what would be the total amount?” The level of formal education of the parent was obtained by asking the following question: “How many years of formal schooling have you had in Asia and America together?” The values for each of these scores were reversed so that high scores represented low SES. This was done to ensure that statistical analysis would yield information consistent with the direction of the effect predicted in the hypothesis. That is, low SES, rather than high SES, should be predictive of gang involvement.

Youth Opportunities. Youth were asked to list the after-school activities in which they were regularly engaged, as well as the approximate number of hours spent each week on each activity. The sum of hours spent each week on after school activities served as a measure of youth opportunities. These values were also reversed so that higher mean values represented fewer youth opportunities.

Interaction of SES and Youth Opportunities. A variable representing the combined effect of low SES and low youth opportunities was created by computing the product of these two variables (i.e., SES multiplied by Youth Opportunities is the interaction of SES and opportunities). A higher interaction score represents greater social disadvantages than a lower score.

Results. Using logistic regression, it was found that socioeconomic status and youth opportunities did not predict gang membership for either the traditional measure of gang involvement or the social centrality measure.

Public Health Hypothesis

The public health hypothesis suggests that risk and protective factors relating to gang membership accurately predict gang involvement. One possible risk factor used in the previous analysis, lack of youth opportunities, was also included. The other risk factors examined included level of gang activity in the youth's neighborhood, the youth's attitude toward gangs, family conflict, and anomia (a sense of alienation from others--not anomie, a sense of social normlessness). Protective factors examined included family social support, adult mentors, achievement motivation, positive school attitude, and a sense of general control in life.

Neighborhood Gangs. To assess the level of gang activity in the youth's neighborhood, eight items referring to gang presence were used. Each item was followed by a four-point Likert scale with 0 representing "No - none" to 3 representing "Yes - a lot." The questions were similar to the following: "Is there talk about gangs around your neighborhood?" and "Among kids in your neighborhood, how much pressure is there to be a member of a gang?" A greater mean value on these 8 items indicates a higher level of gang activity or presence than a lower mean value. Cronbach's alpha for these items was .87, indicating that the measure has good internal consistency.

Gang Attitude. Ten items referring to youths' perception of gangs were used to measure attitude toward gangs. Examples of the items are as follows: "Most kids in gangs are really okay" and "Some gang members deserve a lot of respect." A greater mean value indicates a

more positive perception of gangs than a smaller mean value. The mean scores obtained in this study produced a Cronbach's alpha of .89, indicating that this measure also has good reliability.

Family Conflict. Nineteen items were used to measure the level of family conflict as reported by the youth. Some items were adapted from the cohesion and conflict sub-scales of the Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1974). The items were similar to the following: "We fight a lot in our family" and "The only time I can be myself is when I am away from my family." The greater the mean value, the greater the family conflict. Based upon the mean scores obtained from youths' responses, the measure was found to have good reliability; Cronbach's alpha was .86.

Family Social Support. Three items were used to measure the amount of social support provided by the youth's family. The questions posed to the youth referred specifically to family members, and were as follows: "Whom do you go to if you have a problem you want to talk about?", "Who accepts you totally, including both your worst and your best points?" and "Whom can you really count on to care about you, regardless of what is happening to you?" Youths answered each item by providing the initials of each family member who came to mind. The greater the number of initials given, the greater the amount of social support available to the youth from family members.

Mentor. Two items referring to the presence of an adult mentor in the youth's life were used. The statements were as follows: "There is no one I can truly look up to" (the response to this item was reversed) and "I know at least one adult whom I wish I were like." The greater the mean value, the more likely that the youth has an adult role model.

Achievement Motivation. Two items were used to determine the youths' motivation to achieve academically. The statements were as follows: "I give school my best effort" and "I

learn a lot in school.” The greater the mean value, the higher the level of motivation to achieve. Based upon the mean scores obtained, Cronbach’s alpha was .67, indicating that the reliability of the scale is satisfactory.

School Attitude. To determine youths’ attitude toward school, the following two items were used: “In general, I like school” and “School is worth going to.” The greater the mean value, the more positive the school attitude.

General Control. Using three items, this measure assessed youths’ perceived level of control over everyday events and outcomes. The items were as follows: “There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life,” “I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life,” and “Sometimes I feel that I’m being pushed around in life.” A greater mean value indicates a lower level of perceived control over life’s outcomes than a smaller mean value.

Anomia. A generalized, pervasive sense of social malintegration or “self-others alienation” was measured using four items. These items were adopted from an established scale by Srole (1956). The items were similar to the following: “People must live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself” and “Things for the average person are getting worse, not better.” The greater the mean value, the poorer the sense of social integration.

Results. Using logistic regression, it was found that among all risk and protective factors examined, only neighborhood gangs had an influence on gang involvement. Youths with a high perception of gang presence in their neighborhood were more likely to be gang-involved than youths with a low perception of gang presence in their neighborhood.

Social Development Hypothesis

The social development hypothesis states that low social bond, poor social environment, and poor psychological development predict gang involvement. Social bond variables included delinquency, commitment to family, and peer integration. Social environment variables included neighborhood safety and school safety. Psychological development variables included attitude toward the law, self-esteem, and general control. The variables labeled neighborhood gangs, gang attitude, family conflict, and general control have been used previously, thus their descriptions are omitted in this section.

Delinquency. Fifty-six items assessed the types of delinquent acts youths had committed, many of which were identical to those in the National Youth Survey. Each item was answered with either a “yes” or “no” response. Questions concerning delinquent acts ranged in seriousness from skipping class without an excuse, to use of a weapon or force to make someone surrender money or things. All items were combined into a composite score. Higher values represent more delinquency than lower values. Based upon the mean scores obtained from the youths’ responses, Cronbach’s alpha was .93 indicating that the measure is internally consistent.

Commitment to Family. Eight items were used to measure youths’ attachment, commitment and involvement with their families. Items were similar to the following: “I can live up to what my family expects of me in school” and “ Everything I do is for my family.” The higher the mean value, the lower the level of commitment to the family. Based upon the mean scores obtained from youths’ responses, Cronbach’s alpha was .56, indicating that the measure was not reliable. Item analysis showed that

removal of items would not improve consistency. All items were retained due to their face validity as a measure of family commitment.

Peer Integration. Six items referring to youths' preference for assimilating with American and Vietnamese youths were used as a measure of peer integration. Examples of the items include the following: "I wish American teenagers would respect me as an American" and "I wish Asian teenagers saw me as an Asian." The higher the mean value, the greater the preference for integrating with both American and Vietnamese youths. Based upon the mean scores obtained, Cronbach's alpha was .65, indicating that the scale is adequately reliable.

Safety in Neighborhood. Three items measured how safe youth feel in their neighborhood. The items were similar to the following: "I feel safe in my neighborhood" and "My neighborhood is a nice place to live." The higher the mean value, the lower the perceived level of safety in the neighborhood.

School Safety. Three additional items were used to measure youth perception of personal safety at school. The items were similar to the following: "Sometimes I'm afraid to go to school because of kids who pick fights" and "I have been threatened by kids at school." Each item was followed by a five-point scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." A higher mean value indicates a greater level of intimidation than a lower mean value.

Police Attitude. Seven items measured youth attitude toward the law and police officers. Items were similar to the following: "Police like to show their power more than they like to help people" and "As long as I am under 18, I can get away with almost any crime." The greater the mean value, the more negative the attitude toward law enforcement. Based upon the mean scores obtained from youths' responses, Cronbach's alpha was .82, indicating that the scale is internally consistent.

Self-esteem. Self esteem was measured using seven items referring to how youths generally feel about themselves. Items were similar to the following: “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” A higher mean value indicates a more positive self-esteem than a lower value. Based upon the mean scores obtained from youths’ responses, Cronbach’s alpha was .76, indicating the scale has good reliability.

Results. Using logistic regression, it was found that social bond and social environment were predictive of gang involvement. Youths who have low attachment, commitment, and involvement with their families, and who have gangs in their neighborhood, are more likely to be involved in gangs than youths with high social bond and a desirable social environment.

Social Learning Hypothesis

The social learning hypothesis states that differential association and differential reinforcement predict gang involvement. Attitude toward gangs was used as one of the reinforcer variables. As this variable was described previously, its description is omitted in this section.

Perceived Adult Approval. Two items measured youths’ perceptions as to how adults in their families feel about gangs. The questions were as follows: “My family has warned me not to join gangs” and “I would not tell my family if I had a friend that was in a gang.” The greater the mean value, the more negative the perceived adult attitude toward gangs.

Perceived Parent Reaction. Parental reaction was assessed using three items concerning youths’ perceptions regarding how their parents would feel if the youths were involved in a gang. The items were similar to the following: “My family would be upset if it knew I was in a gang,” and “Being in a gang would shame my family.” The greater the mean value, the more negative the perceived parental reaction.

Table 11

Cultural Hypotheses: Variable Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1) Rejection of Asian Identity								
2) Social Barriers	-.03							
3) Youth American Identity	-.36***	-.13						
4) Parent American Identity	.03	.03	.06					
5) Cultural Distance	-.24***	-.07	.77***	.69***				
6) Family Conflict	-.07	.33***	.06	.05	.08			
7) Low Asian & American Identity	.29***	.02	-.86***	.02	-.61***	-.02		
8) Traditional Measure	-.06	.01	.04	.13	.11	.22**	.06	
9) Social Centrality	-.07	.11	.02	.09	.07	.14*	.02	.22**

Note. Number of cases range from 226 to 233. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

American Identity. American cultural identity was assessed using 21 items intended to measure preference for the American way of life.¹ The items within the scale were developed to measure the following four factors: (1) Self-identification (e.g., “I feel good about my American background,” and “I am basically American”); (2) Values (e.g., “To me, being ‘honest’ is usually more important than preserving harmony in relationships” and “I usually speak up and say what is on my mind, even if it might embarrass others”); (3) Child-rearing practices, (e.g., in the case of youth surveys, from the stem: “If I were to have children one day...” “I would treat them as individuals” and “I would give them many choices”); and (4) Behavioral preferences, (e.g., “I prefer to shop in American-style shopping centers” and “If I were ill, I would take the advice of a Western medical doctor”). These factors were selected for their potential ability to contrast American and Asian identities. A greater mean value indicates a higher preference for the American way of life than a lower mean value. The mean scores produced a Cronbach’s alpha of .75 for the parents’ responses, and a Cronbach’s alpha of .73 for the youths’ responses, indicating satisfactory reliability for both measures.

This scale, and a similar measure of Asian identity, was developed from ideas presented by Kaneshiro (1996), where it is suggested that behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values be incorporated into the assessment of cultural identity. However, a commonly used identity scale based solely upon beliefs, devised by Oetting and Beauvais (1990), was also used. Additionally, the frequently used Suinn-Lew acculturation scale, based largely upon language, dietary, and

¹For readers who question the existence or nature of an “American way of life,” a book written to help individuals from other nations to understand Americans should make interesting reading--see Althen (1988).

social preferences (Suinn, Rickard-Figueroa, Lew, and Vigil, 1987; Suinn, Ahuna, and Khoo, 1992), was also included in this study. Results using these measures will be reported elsewhere.

Cultural Distance. Cultural distance was computed by subtracting the parents' American cultural identity score from the youths' American cultural identity score (i.e., Youth American identity score minus Parent American identity score equals Cultural Distance). The greater the cultural distance score, the greater the cultural distance between parent and youth.

Results. Using logistic regression, it was found that these variables do not adequately explain gang involvement. Youths who have greater American identities than their parents do not experience greater family conflict and are not more likely to be gang-involved.

Cultural Marginalization Hypothesis

The cultural marginalization hypothesis suggests that low Asian identity and low American identity predict gang involvement. The American identity used was identical to the measure described in the previous section.

Asian Identity. Asian cultural identity was also assessed using a 21-item scale assessing preference for an Asian way of life. The scale items developed for the Asian identity scale were similar to the scale items developed for the American identity scale: (1) Self-identification (e.g., "I feel good about my Asian background" and "I am basically Asian"); (2) Values (e.g., "I must always show indebtedness and gratitude" and "I must be polite and considerate at all times, and must keep my true feelings hidden"); (3) Child-rearing practices, (e.g., in the case of youth surveys, from the stem: "If I have children one day..." "I will almost always know what is best for them" and "I will make important decisions for them, for their own good"); and (4) Behavioral preferences, (e.g., "I prefer to shop in Asian-style shopping centers" and "If I were ill, I would

take the advice of a traditional Asian healer”). The Asian identity scale was counter-balanced with the American identity scale in order to control for the influence that responses to each scale may have upon the other. The greater the mean value, the greater the preference for an Asian way of life. Based upon the mean scores obtained, Cronbach’s alpha was .69 for youths’ responses, indicating satisfactory reliability, and .78 for parents’ responses, indicating good reliability. This scale was counter-balanced with the American identity scale to control for possible influence the first scale may have upon responses to the second scale.

Interaction of Low Asian and Low American Identity. To check the interaction of Asian identity and American identity, the product of these variables was computed.

Results. Using logistic regression, it was found that youth with a low Asian identity and low American identity are not more likely to be gang-involved than youth with high identity scores.

Best Model

Because none of the eight hypotheses were fully supported, exploratory analyses were conducted in an effort to obtain a better fitting model to explain gang involvement.

Measures. All variables used in the exploratory model have been described in previous sections. Variables selected for inclusion were all those that demonstrated predictive ability in the previous analyses.

Results. The correlation matrix for all variables in the exploratory model has been included in Table 13. A series of Stepwise multiple regressions were computed to conduct a path analysis that would explain the greatest proportion of variance in the gang involvement variables. This analysis

Table 13
Best Model Variable Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1) Neighborhood Gangs										
2) Gang Attitude	.45***									
3) School Attitude	-.30***	.32***								
4) Family Conflict	.28***	.46***	-.32***							
5) Self-Esteem	-.06	-.18**	.20**	-.46***						
6) Anomia	.25***	.41***	-.25***	.45***	-.42***					
7) Family Attitude	.10	.23**	-.16**	.50***	-.30***	.25**				
8) Benefits of Gangs	.30***	.35***	-.14*	.10	.05	.18**	.10			
9) Barriers to Gangs	.15*	.22**	-.21***	.33***	-.29***	.26***	.07	.01		
10) Traditional Measure	.51***	.41***	-.17**	.22***	.01	.21**	.05	.21**	.01	
11) Social Centrality	.22**	.32***	-.25***	.14	-.05	.19**	.00	.09	.11	.22**

Note. Number of cases range from 226 to 233. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

yields accurate path coefficient estimations, but violates the assumption that errors of prediction are normally distributed around every predicted dependent variable score, rendering tests of significance invalid. Thus, the test of significance associated with the Wald statistic generated by logistic regression was used to determine the statistical significance of each independent variable's relation to the dependent variable. The result of the path analysis is presented in Figure 3.

In sum, using both logistic regression and multiple regression, it was found that gang involvement is best explained by two main factors: Pro-gang attitude and Neighborhood gangs. These two variables explain 11% of the variance in the traditional measure of gang involvement and 32% of the variance in the social centrality measure. Further analysis showed that 35% of pro-gang attitude is explained by four variables, school attitude, family conflict, anomia, and benefits of gangs. Hence, the more negative the school attitude, the greater the family conflict and anomia, and the more benefits perceived in being in a gang, the greater the pro-gang attitude, and the greater the likelihood of gang involvement.

Strengths and weaknesses

This project benefitted from careful planning centered upon causal explanations of gang involvement suggested by individuals who work directly with delinquent youth. Interviews with both parents and youth provided valuable family unit information not frequently obtained in gang research. This project explicitly examined plausible explanations of gang involvement, paying particular attention to methods that would ensure unbiased responses from all project participants. An additional strength is the innovative social centrality measure of gang involvement that was developed for use in this study.

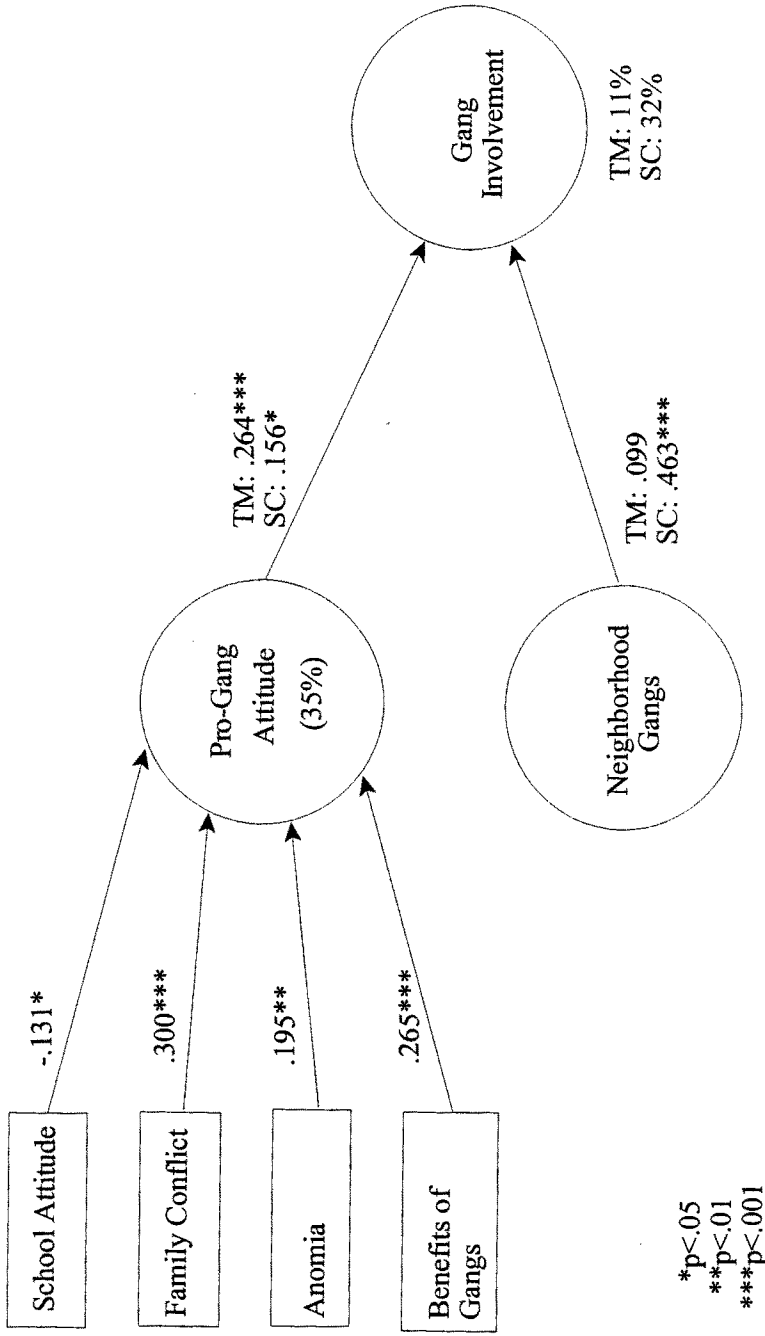


Figure 3. Exploratory Model of Predictors of Gang Involvement.
 TM = Traditional Measure of gang involvement. SC = Social Centrality Measure of gang involvement.

This measure identified youth involved in gangs that would otherwise be excluded from gang classification using traditional approaches to gang identification.

The major limitation of the project is the cross-sectional nature of the data. As this is the first gang study in which Vietnamese youths and their parents were extensively interviewed in a controlled setting, this project provides direction for future longitudinal data collection, but cannot summarily establish the causal linkages of antecedent factors of gang involvement. In spite of efforts to obtain the most representative sample of youth under 18 years of age, the sample does not include youth who are institutionalized and is biased toward younger juveniles. Older youth were difficult to recruit into the study, especially those who were able to resist their parents' desire to participate. However, because the purpose of the project was to capture the antecedent factors of gang involvement, the younger juveniles provided the relevant information.

Summary

In all, this study is a quantitative examination of the etiological factors of youth involvement in gangs. It is the only study of its kind because it tests several theories of gang involvement to determine whether such theories are applicable to a newly arrived refugee population. It was found that the non-cultural predictors of youth attitude toward gangs and the presence of gangs in the residential areas near the youth's home were the strongest predictors of gang involvement. These findings are consistent with the handful of other studies that have specifically examined this topic. As limited in scope as these findings are, non-cultural predictors were far more powerful than the predictors used in cultural explanations of gang involvement. Possible cultural explanations of gang involvement were carefully considered, and cultural measures were planned far in advance of data collection. Perhaps other measures of

these constructs may be found to be predictive in the future, and in other samples using other methods; however, that may be unlikely as none of the many scales devised for use in this project was even correlated with any of the measures of gang involvement used in the present study. Without further empirical support of a cultural connection to gang involvement among Vietnamese youth, the connection may be based more on anecdotal findings that pertain to other populations (e.g., Blacks and Latinos) and not the Vietnamese population. Further investigation of cultural explanations is necessary to clarify the role that cultural factors play in gang involvement. Because the present results indicate that certain non-cultural factors are influential, both cultural and non-cultural issues should be further examined.

CONCLUSION

The overall goal of this project was to provide recommendations for designing successful gang-involvement prevention programs. Four recommendations are advanced from the analyses in these studies. The first two come from Study I. This study illustrated the need for gang-involvement prevention programs and the need to focus them on audiences who are by far at greatest risk of gang membership: minority males. The second two come from Study II, where it was found that youth attitude toward gangs and gang members must be reversed from positive to negative, and that youth must be given the knowledge and skills necessary to cope with gangs in their neighborhood. Specifically, they must be taught how to come and go in their own neighborhood without being influenced by gang-involved youth.

Our first recommendation is that gang-involvement prevention programs are necessary and must be carefully planned. They should target and measure the level of gang involvement using more sources than just self-identification of gang “membership.” In this study, at least

19% and as much as 33% of all delinquency is attributable to gangs. Based upon previous studies demonstrating that gangs increase the delinquency of youth who would otherwise not be delinquent (Thornberry, et. al, 1993; Battin, et. al, 1998), it is suggested that gang membership prevention programs may contribute significantly to reducing delinquency.

Second, gang prevention programs should intensify efforts among those at greatest risk of gang involvement: male minority youth. Gang membership is a phenomenon found primarily among ethnic minority groups. Although this finding may not be politically popular, it is a fact in Westminster (as well as across the nation, Curry (1996), and this fact provides information that may improve the effectiveness of gang prevention programs. This benefit may be obtained by providing prevention treatment to the population at greatest risk of gang involvement. It is clear that more information is needed to determine why individuals participate in gangs in order to develop realistic and effective alternatives. Regardless, when designing gang involvement prevention programs, the focus of attention should be placed on minority audiences (those at greatest risk of gang membership), rather than general audiences.

Third, prevention programs should aim to reverse positive attitudes youth have toward gangs. Strong positive attitudes should be replaced with strong negative attitudes. Our results show that such an attitude change may be facilitated by considering the following: (1) increasing pro-school attitudes; (2) increasing knowledge and skills necessary to cope with family conflict; (3) reducing feelings of anomia; and (4) eliminating perceptions that gangs can be beneficial to participants.

Fourth, because having gangs in the neighborhood is clearly an influential factor, gang involvement prevention programs should focus on providing youth with the knowledge and skills

necessary to cope with gangs within their residential area. This may include teaching them skills in avoiding the influence of gang members and increasing their confidence by illustrating that gang protection is not necessary to feel safe in their neighborhood.

In sum, we propose that policy makers carefully consider the working logic of proposed gang programs. Programs that include mechanisms to change youth attitude toward gangs, and increase their skills in resisting the influence of gang-involved youth in the neighborhood should be considered for political and financial support. Prevention programs that do not address causal aspects of youth gang involvement should not be considered for support. Community leaders should be aware of the popularity of gangs among youth, and work towards reducing their appeal to youth. Efforts should be made to diminish the idea that gang affiliation is an admirable quality. This may be achieved by changing the way that information about gangs is conveyed by the media. Local governments should also be aware of the influence that residential areas containing many gang-involved youth may have upon youth not yet involved in gangs. Youth should be taught how to live within their own neighborhoods and remain free of influence of those who are gang-involved. Program planners should carefully design prevention programs based upon empirical evidence of factors causally related to gang involvement, and avoid anecdotal explanations. This, of course, requires more research into the causes of gang involvement.

Directions for future research

Additional longitudinal research concerning youth involvement in gangs is needed. These studies should focus on measurement and testing of factors found to be relevant in correlational studies, such as the present project. Further research is needed in the operationalization and measurement of gang involvement. This is especially true among juveniles who may have only early signs of involvement or may have only peripheral involvement in the activities of gangs. The innovative measure of gang involvement used in the present study--social centrality--should be considered for application in other gang involvement research. It is a promising approach to identifying a youth who is involved in a gang, but whose self-report stops short of declaring himself a "member" of a gang. Finally, it appears that cultural identity issues are not as influential as popularly believed. Therefore we suggest that future research focus on non-cultural factors, rather than solely on cultural identity issues.

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