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Juvenile Delinquency and Serious Injury Victimization



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This Bulletin is part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Youth Development Series, which presents findings from the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. Teams at the University at Albany, State University of New York; the University of Colorado; and the University of Pittsburgh collaborated extensively in designing the studies. At study sites in Rochester, New York; Denver, Colorado; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the three research teams have interviewed 4,000 participants at regular intervals for a decade, recording their lives in detail. Findings to date indicate that preventing delinquency requires accurate identification of the risk factors that increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior and the protective factors that enhance positive adolescent development.

Public opinion often supports the idea that offenders are vastly different from their victims—offenders inflict physical harm and cause property loss while victims are innocent bystanders. A proportion of victims no doubt fall into this category. However, another category of victims exists. These victims are more prone to (1) engage in illicit activities that cause conflict (e.g., belong to a gang, deal drugs, fence stolen goods), (2) associate with delinquent friends who have poor social and problem-solving skills, (3) victimize other delinquents, and (4) have little recourse to legal means of conflict

resolution (e.g., the justice system). Analyses of juveniles who are killed or wounded by guns show that almost all of these juveniles had been highly delinquent themselves (Loeber et al., 1999).

Delinquency and victimization are often intertwined and mutually stimulate each other (Lauritsen, Laub, and Sampson, 1992; Simon, Dent, and Sussman, 1997; Singer, 1986; Thornberry and Figlio, 1974). Huizinga and Jakob-Chien (1998) reported that as the seriousness of offending increases, so does the probability of being violently victimized (49 percent of male serious, violent juvenile offenders were violently victimized compared with 12 percent of nondelinquents). This indicates that as the occurrence of delinquency increases in the juvenile population, the chances of victimization increase as well. Victimization, in turn, is thought to increase the risk of delinquent acts, particularly violent victimization and offending. In the most extreme cases, for example, when a gang member is killed or seriously wounded by a rival gang member, retaliation often takes place, followed by counterretaliation.

Knowledge of patterns and predictors of victimization could be beneficial in developing intervention strategies to reduce both offending and victimization. Few longitudinal studies on victimization, however, have provided insight into the predictors of victimization (see Esbensen,

A Message From OJJDP

Conventional wisdom generally conceives of victims of violence as innocent bystanders. Although many victims fall into this category, this Bulletin focuses on another set of victims: youth involved with juvenile delinquency. These victims are prone to engage in illegal activities, associate with delinquents, victimize other delinquents, and avoid legal recourse in resolving conflicts.

It appears that delinquent behavior and victimization are inextricably linked for some individuals. A recent study found that 1 in 2 males who were serious, violent juvenile offenders were violently victimized compared with 1 in 10 of their nondelinquent peers. Being victimized, in turn, may lead to victimizing others. Retaliatory acts of violence, often associated with gangs, are classic examples of this cycle of behavior.

A clearer understanding of the patterns and predictors of juvenile victimization thus offers the potential for increased effectiveness in designing and implementing strategies to reduce both victimization and offending.

This Bulletin draws on data from two OJJDP longitudinal studies on the causes and correlates of juvenile delinquency—the Denver Youth Survey and the Pittsburgh Youth Study—to enhance our appreciation of the interrelationship between delinquency and victimization.

Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency

The Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency is an example of OJJDP's support of long-term research in a variety of fields. Initiated in 1986, the Causes and Correlates program includes three closely coordinated longitudinal projects: the Pittsburgh Youth Study, directed by Dr. Rolf Loeber at the University of Pittsburgh; the Rochester Youth Development Study, directed by Dr. Terence P. Thornberry at the University at Albany, State University of New York; and the Denver Youth Survey, directed by Dr. David Huizinga at the University of Colorado. The Causes and Correlates program represents a milestone in criminological research because it constitutes the largest shared-measurement approach ever achieved in delinquency research. From the beginning, the three research teams have worked together and have used similar measurement techniques, thus enhancing their ability to generalize their findings.

Although each of the three projects has unique features, they share several key elements:

- ◆ All three are longitudinal investigations that involve repeated contacts with the same juveniles over a substantial portion of their developmental years.
- ◆ In each study, researchers have conducted face-to-face interviews with adolescents in a private setting. By using self-report data rather than juvenile justice records, researchers have been able to come much closer to measuring actual delinquent behaviors and ascertaining the age at onset of delinquent careers.
- ◆ Multiple perspectives on each child's development and behavior are obtained through interviews with the child's primary caretaker and teachers and from official school, police, and court records.
- ◆ Participants are interviewed at regular and frequent intervals (6 or 12 months).
- ◆ Sample retention has been high. As of 1997, more than 80 percent of the participants had been retained at each site, and the average retention rate across all interview periods was 90 percent.

- ◆ The three sites have collaborated to use a common measurement package, collecting data on a wide range of variables that makes possible cross-site comparisons of similarities and differences.

Each project has disseminated the results of its research through a broad range of publications, reports, and presentations. In 1997, OJJDP initiated the Youth Development Series of Bulletins to present findings from the Causes and Correlates program. In addition to the present Bulletin, eight other Bulletins have been published in the Youth Development Series: *Epidemiology of Serious Violence, Gang Members and Delinquent Behavior, In the Wake of Childhood Maltreatment, Developmental Pathways in Boys' Disruptive and Delinquent Behavior, Family Disruption and Delinquency, Teenage Fatherhood and Delinquent Behavior, Co-occurrence of Delinquency and Other Problem Behaviors, and Gun Use by Male Juveniles: Research and Prevention.*

Huizinga, and Menard, 1999, for an exception). On the one hand, because delinquency and victimization often are intertwined, predictors of delinquency in general (e.g., coming from a low socioeconomic background, poor parental supervision) also may be expected to predict victimization. On the other hand, it may be expected that victimization can best be predicted by proximal risk factors (i.e., risk factors occurring close in time to the event), such as weapons carrying, drug dealing, and association with delinquent peers.

This Bulletin reports empirical findings on victimization from two sites of OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency: Denver, CO, and Pittsburgh, PA. The longitudinal, multisite approach used by these studies makes it possible to answer a number of important questions concerning victimization involving serious injury. Specific questions addressed are (1) What is the prevalence of victimization involving serious injury in the general population? (2) What are the proximal and distal factors associated with becoming a victim who sustains a serious injury? (3) Which risk

factors or combinations of risk factors best predict victimization involving serious injury? Throughout this Bulletin, the focus is on victims of assaults or robberies who sustained serious injuries as a result of the victimization. The terms "victim" and "victimization" will be used to refer to victimization involving serious injury.

Two Longitudinal Studies

The prospective longitudinal research design of the Denver Youth Survey and the Pittsburgh Youth Study permits the investigation of developmental processes over the life course. The two projects have involved more than 3,000 inner-city children and youth who, at the beginning of the research in 1987, ranged in age from 7 to 15. Youth and parents have been interviewed in private settings at regular intervals.

Denver Youth Survey

The Denver Youth Survey is based on a survey of more than 20,000 households randomly selected from high-risk

neighborhoods in Denver, CO. The sample consists of 1,527 youth, approximately equal numbers of boys and girls, who were ages 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 in 1987. The ethnic composition of the sample is 33 percent African American, 45 percent Hispanic, 10 percent white, and 12 percent other, as self-identified by the respondents. This Bulletin focuses on the three oldest cohorts of youth (464 males and 411 females), who were ages 11, 13, and 15 at the start of the study, and covers the first 5 years of the study.

Interviews have been conducted annually with each youth and a primary caretaker (usually the mother figure of the household). Attrition has been low in this study; more than 92 percent of the respondents completed interviews annually from 1988 to 1992.

Pittsburgh Youth Study

The Pittsburgh Youth Study initially took a random sample of boys in the first, fourth, and seventh grades in inner-city public schools in 1987. Through interviews with each boy, one of his parents, and a teacher, the boys were screened for

the presence of risk factors involving 21 antisocial behaviors. The final sample consisted of 1,517 boys, including 30 percent of the interviewees who were most disruptive and a random sample of the remaining boys. Slightly more than half the boys identified themselves as African American and the remainder as white, a ratio similar to that found in Pittsburgh public schools.¹ This Bulletin focuses on youth who were in the seventh grade at the start of the study ($n=506$).

Participants in the seventh grade cohort were followed from 1987 (average age, 13) to 1993 (average age, 18.5). Followups were initially conducted every 6 months and later once per year. At each assessment, the boy's primary caretaker (i.e., the person having primary responsibility for the child within the household) and teacher were also interviewed. In most cases (91 percent), the caretaker was the boy's biological mother, stepmother, or adoptive mother. Attrition has been quite low in this study, with an average participation rate across phases of 92.7 percent.

Assessment of Victimization and Risk Factors

Youth participants in the Denver Youth Survey and the Pittsburgh Youth Study self-reported annually whether they had been victims. Participants were asked if they had received injuries from an assault or robbery (e.g., been attacked by someone with a weapon or by someone trying to seriously hurt or kill them). Injuries were considered serious if they involved a cut or bleeding, being knocked unconscious, or hospitalization. Victimization was identified in the Pittsburgh study when the respondents were, on average, ages 16.5 to 18.5, and in the Denver survey when the respondents were, on average, ages 13 to 17. In Pittsburgh, a number of boys who had been murdered ($n=14$) were included in the victimization group. Weighted data for prevalence figures that correct for the screening methods of each study were used so that population prevalence rates could be presented.

Risk factors were selected from family, school, peer, and personal domains. Family factors included low socioeconomic status, parental crime, single-parent household, and poor parental supervision. Individual factors included poor school grades, involvement in gang or group fights,² weapons carrying,

participation in serious assault, drug use, drug sales, and association with delinquent peers. Also included were measures of a youth's being oppositional, hyperactive, or impulsive. These measures were developed by Espiritu (1998) and employ a configuration of items from the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1987).

Risk factors were measured using information from youth respondents, parents, and, in Pittsburgh, teachers. Each of these informants provided useful and independent information about a youth respondent's behavior and background. As a result of extensive collaboration between the Causes and Correlates sites, all of the measures used were very similar and, in many cases, identical. In addition, a rigorous effort was made to ensure comparability of measures used in this Bulletin. In Pittsburgh, all risk factors used were measured during the first 2 years of the study. In Denver, family and psychological factors were measured during the first 2 years of the study, and other individual risk factors were measured prior to or concurrent with the first reported incident of becoming a victim. Thus, risk is measured temporally either prior to or concurrent with reported victimization.

Results

Prevalence of Victimization

Table 1 shows the prevalence of victimization for both sites. A striking percentage of youth and young adults had been seriously injured as a result of assaults or robberies. Among males, 11 percent in Pittsburgh and 20 percent in Denver reported having been a victim, as did 10 percent of the females in Denver. Prevalence rates were higher among minorities at both sites, particularly for African American males.

Risk Factors for Victimization

Because victimization is not evenly distributed across the youth population, the Denver and Pittsburgh studies used control groups that matched the victims' demographics (age, ethnicity, and, in Denver, gender) to compare risk factors for victims and nonvictims.

Table 2 shows the relation of victimization to individual risk factors. It also shows the odds ratio (the increased likelihood of victimization given the presence of a particular risk factor compared with its absence), statistical significance, and

Table 1: Prevalence of Victimization

	Number of Youth	Number of Victims	Prevalence of Victims, Weighted (%)*
Pittsburgh Youth Study			
Male	478†	62	11
African American	273	43	14
White	205	19	9
Denver Youth Survey			
Male	460	94	20
African American	173	46	27
Hispanic	210	40	19
White	32	2	6
Other	45	6	13
Female	413	43	10
African American	158	20	12
Hispanic	181	16	9
White	39	4	9
Other	35	3	9
Total	873	137	16

* Prevalence rates use weighted data that provide estimates for the populations from which the samples at each site were drawn.

† Although this Bulletin focuses on 506 youth from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, this table focuses on the 478 youth for whom full data were available.

percent injured in the risk-present and risk-absent groups.

Because many of the family and individual characteristics were not statistically significant in Pittsburgh and often were only significant for one gender in Denver, only the significant risk variables are included in table 2. The lack of significance of the family and some individual characteristics in Pittsburgh may reflect the somewhat older ages of the Pittsburgh sample when they were asked about victimization.

Several risk factors were significantly related to victimization at both sites and for both genders. These included participating in gang/group fights, carrying a weapon, committing serious assault, selling drugs, and associating with delinquent peers. The group of youth characterized by any one of these risk factors was generally two to four times more likely to have included victims than the group of youth who did not have the risk factor (see figure 1).

As shown in table 2, between 24 and 40 percent of males involved in gang/group fights had themselves been seriously injured, while approximately 12 percent of those who had not been involved in such fights had been seriously injured. Among females, 27 percent of those involved in gang/group fights had been seriously injured, while 8 percent of those who had not been involved in such fights had been seriously injured. Males who carried weapons were approximately three times more likely to be victimized than those who did not carry weapons—27 to 33 percent of the weapons carriers became victims, as opposed to only 10 percent who did not carry weapons. Among females, the results were similar. Of those who carried weapons, 21 percent had been victims, and of those who did not carry weapons, only 6 percent had been victims. Similarly, both males and females who committed aggravated assault, sold drugs, had delinquent peers, or committed violent acts against others were much more likely to become victims than those who did not engage in such activities.

Several family and other risk factors were associated with elevated levels of victimization, but only in the Denver sample. This most likely reflects the age range and the concurrent measurement of risk and victimization used in analyses for that site. Among boys and girls, these risk factors included coming from a single-parent household, being oppositional

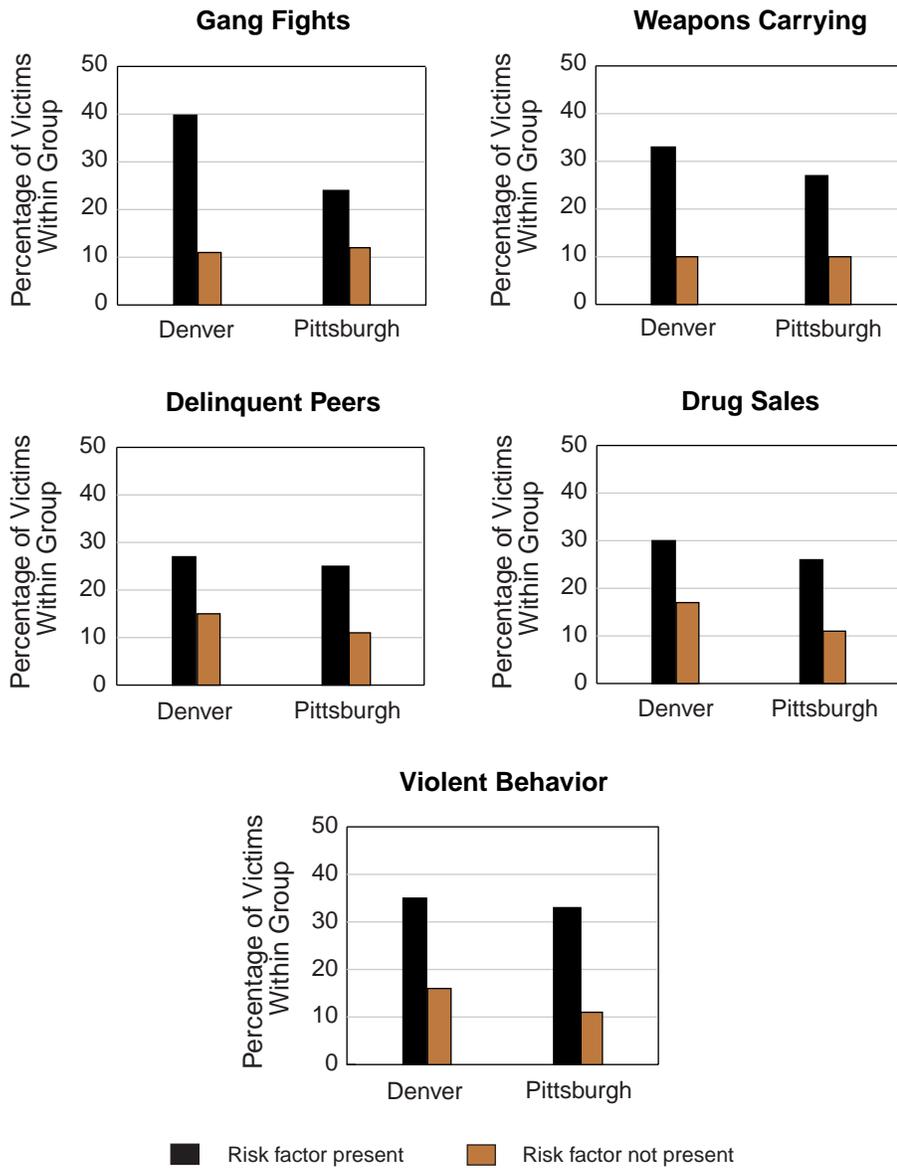
Table 2: Significant Risk Factors for Victimization

Risk Factors*	Odds Ratio	p	Injured (%), by Risk Factor	
			Present	Absent
Family				
Low socioeconomic status				
DYS, female	2.00	0.03	20	10
Parental crime				
DYS, male	1.64	0.00	28	17
Single-parent household				
DYS				
Male	1.84	0.01	24	13
Female	2.33	0.00	14	6
Poor parental supervision				
DYS, female	1.78	0.07	16	9
Individual				
Oppositional behavior				
DYS				
Male	1.70	0.00	29	17
Female	2.00	0.02	16	8
Hyperactive				
DYS				
Male	2.07	0.00	31	15
Female	1.89	0.05	17	9
Impulsiveness				
DYS, male	2.10	0.00	29	14
Poor school grades				
DYS, male	1.94	0.00	35	18
Involved in gang fights				
DYS				
Male	3.63	0.00	40	11
Female	3.38	0.00	27	8
PYS	2.30	0.05	24	12
Weapons carrying				
DYS				
Male	3.30	0.00	33	10
Female	3.30	0.00	21	6
PYS	3.20	0.00	27	10
Involved in serious assault				
DYS				
Male	2.19	0.00	35	16
Female	3.67	0.00	33	9
PYS	3.92	0.00	33	11
Drug use				
DYS				
Male	2.20	0.00	33	15
Female	3.57	0.00	25	7
Drug sales				
DYS				
Male	1.70	0.01	30	17
Female	7.50	0.00	60	8
PYS	2.80	0.01	26	11
Delinquent peers				
DYS				
Male	1.60	0.00	27	15
Female	4.25	0.01	34	8
PYS	2.60	0.00	25	11

Note: Estimates provided are based on data weighted to reflect these groups in the population.

* DYS, Denver Youth Survey; PYS, Pittsburgh Youth Study (all male).

Figure 1: Effect of Risk Factors on Victimization of Males



and hyperactive, and using drugs. Among males, risk factors also included having poor school grades, being impulsive, and having parents involved in criminal activities.

The relation of various combinations of risk factors to victimization was examined using the five risk factors that were closely associated with such victimization at both sites (participating in gang/group fights, carrying a weapon, committing serious assault, selling drugs, and having delinquent peers). Figure 2 shows clearly that for males the number of risk factors a youth has and his chances of becoming

a victim are related. Among males overall, as the number of risk factors increased, so did the prevalence of victimization. While only 6 to 8 percent of males with no risk factors were victimized, 50 to 70 percent who had four or more risk factors had been victimized (see figure 2). Similar findings held for females. Among females with none of the five risk factors mentioned above, 5 percent had become victims; among those with one risk factor, 10 percent had become victims; and among those with two or more risk factors, 42 percent had become victims. Although the number of females with four or more

risk factors was small, 100 percent of these females had become victims.

Across both studies and for each gender, the combination of committing assaults and carrying a weapon was particularly associated with elevated levels of victimization (see table 3). Among males, 40 to 46 percent of those individuals who carried weapons and were assaultive were themselves victims. Among females who carried weapons and were assaultive, 30 percent were victims. Examining all victims as a group, among males in Pittsburgh, 27 percent had this combination of risk factors and 49 percent had at least one of these risk factors. Among male victims in Denver, 62 percent had this combination of risk factors and 84 percent had at least one of these risk factors. Among female victims in Denver, 26 percent had this combination of risk factors and 65 percent had at least one of these risk factors. Thus, in Pittsburgh, about half the victims carried weapons or were involved in assaults, and in Denver, roughly three-quarters of male victims and two-thirds of female victims carried a weapon or were involved in assaults.

Conclusion

A sizeable percentage of youth and young adult males and females reported being victims. In Pittsburgh, 11 percent of males between the average ages of 16.5 and 18.5 received serious injuries when they were assaulted or robbed. In Denver, 20 percent of males and 10 percent of females reported being victims between ages 13 and 17. Quite clearly, victimization was not a rare occurrence in these samples. At both sites, minorities, especially African American males, were more likely to have been victims.

Several risk factors for victimization were found at both sites. These included participating in gang or group fights, carrying a weapon, committing serious assault, selling drugs, and associating with delinquent peers. Fourteen percent of the male victims and 28 percent of the female victims in Denver did not have any of these measured risk factors. In Pittsburgh, 34 percent of the victims did not have any of these risk factors.

Thus, although not all victims had these risk factors, the vast majority of victims (66 percent in Pittsburgh and 87 percent of males and 72 percent of females in Denver) were involved in behaviors or activities that might be associated with

Figure 2: Victimization Rates for Males, by Number of Risk Factors

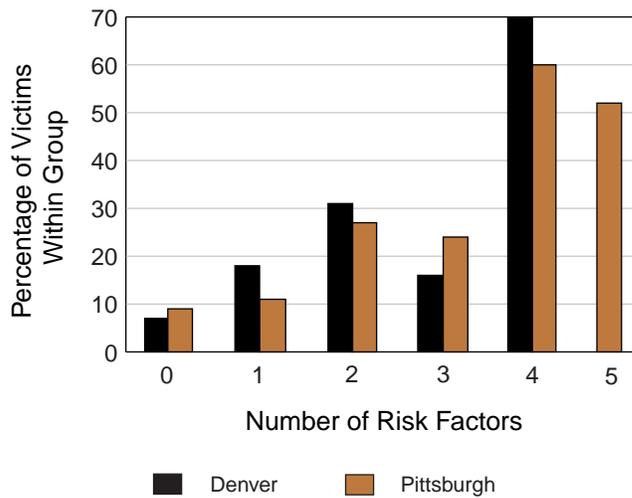


Table 3: Victimization, by Pattern of Risk Factors

Pattern of Risk Factors	Number of Youth	Number of Victims	Rate of Victimization (%)	Victims With Pattern (%)*
Pittsburgh				
No risk factors	150	14	9	34
Assault	28	3	11	7
Hidden weapon	37	6	16	15
Assault and hidden weapon	24	11	46	27
Other risk factors only	50	7	14	17
Denver				
Male				
No risk factors	184	13	7	14
Assault	40	9	23	10
Hidden weapon	61	11	18	12
Assault and hidden weapon	145	58	40	62
Other risk factors only	30	3	10	3
Female				
No risk factors	250	12	5	28
Assault	24	4	17	9
Hidden weapon	74	13	18	30
Assault and hidden weapon	37	11	30	26
Other risk factors only	21	3	14	7

Note: Assault defined as gang fight or other assault. Hidden weapon defined as carrying a hidden weapon. Other risk factors were drug sales and delinquent peers.

* Some percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding.

sustaining serious injuries. This raises a number of issues for the prevention of victimization. First, for the majority of victims, successful delinquency prevention procedures are likely to prevent victimization. Because most victims are themselves involved in assaultive behaviors, sell drugs, and/or have delinquent peers, avoidance of these risky behaviors could result in the lowering of risk for victimization. In fact, although not examined in this Bulletin, victimization may be a fairly strong indicator of a juvenile's involvement in serious delinquency. Interventions designed to reduce the delinquency of identified victims may be successful from both a delinquency and a victimization perspective.

Second, more information is needed about juvenile victims who are not involved in risky behaviors and the events surrounding their victimization so that safety precautions for this group can be developed and taught. Programs for intervening with potential perpetrators of such violence also are needed.

Endnotes

1. A more detailed description of the characteristics of the study participants and the methods used to select them can be found in Loeber and colleagues (1998).

2. Youth who are not members of delinquent gangs report involvement in "gang or group fights," in which groups of youth fight each other. This Bulletin uses the term "gang fights" in a generic sense; participation in a gang fight does not necessarily imply membership in a delinquent gang.

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