



## Groups, gangs, and delinquency: Does organization matter?

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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* A consistent finding of research on delinquency has been that gang members show higher levels of delinquent behavior than non-gang members. However, research attempting to understand the mechanisms underlying this finding is lacking. The basic premise of the current article is that the level of organization found in delinquent groups and gangs matters in clarifying the relationship between membership and delinquency.

*Methods:* This article examined the association between organization and delinquency in a sample of 523 self-reported juvenile offenders from a high school survey conducted in the province of Quebec, Canada.

*Results:* The results showed that 1) there is clearly something special about membership in a gang that influences delinquency beyond the more general membership in a delinquent group; 2) the key to understanding finding lies, in part, in the level of organization found in gangs. Organization emerged as the most important factor associated with general delinquency, involvement in violence, and in drug supply offences, significantly (but not completely) reducing the effect of gang membership on delinquency.

*Conclusions:* Even if most delinquent associations show little signs of formal structure and organization, this study demonstrates the importance of organization as a key mechanism to understand the gang effect on delinquency.

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“There is no hard and fast dividing line between predatory gangs of boys and criminal groups of younger and older adults. They merged into each other by imperceptible gradations, and the latter have their real explanation, for most part, in the former” (Thrasher, 1963: 281)

### Introduction

A consistent finding of research on delinquency has been that gang members show higher levels of delinquent behavior than non-gang members (e.g., Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Gordon, Lahey, Kawai, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschme, 1993). The criminal trajectory followed by young offenders who become gang members is now familiar: average or slightly above average delinquency levels before joining the gang, a significant increase in delinquency during periods of gang membership, followed by a return to lower levels upon leaving the gang. The fact that membership amplifies delinquency is an important piece of the puzzle. Yet, it tells us little about

the reasons why that is the case, or about the mechanisms underlying the membership effect (Klein, 1971). As argued by Thornberry (1993) and others (Klein, 1971; McGloin 2008; Short, 1998), to understand why membership leads to more delinquency, “the structure and dynamics of the group context must be the central focus” (Thornberry et al., 1993: 82). In fact, attention should be paid to both the individual offenders and the variety of gang or group dynamics to which they are subjected to once they become “members”. A focus on group context is especially important because the increased levels of delinquency generally do not last after offenders leave the gang. Whatever is happening to young offenders when they become gang members, it does not appear to have a lasting effect on their offending behavior.

Hearing the calls for more attention to the group context of offending behavior, the current article moves in this direction. The central question raised in this study is whether the level of organization found in a delinquent group (or gang) is associated to the level of delinquency of individual members. The working hypothesis is that individual gang members find themselves members of gangs which vary in organizational complexity, and that such variations are associated with their delinquency levels. The review of extant literature began with a simpler, more general question in mind: What is it about gang membership that seems to bring so much more crime opportunities for its members? For guidance, the inquiry into three research traditions provided useful. First, studies on gangs and delinquency were reviewed in cases where group processes were studied more closely. Second, research in social psychology was

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examined where the effects of a group context on the productivity of individuals were the main focus. Finally, because some delinquent groups and gangs are considered as “social organizations” or, at the very least, subject to organizational dynamics (Hagedorn, 1994; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Weisel, 2002), a review of organization theory helped complete the theoretical framework. Note that this approach does not strictly focus on gang membership, but also membership in other type of delinquent associations - labelled as delinquent groups (Warr, 1996) for the purpose of this article. This broader perspective is consistent with the theoretical approach which considers the effect of group/organizational processes on behavior more generally. This also echoes the perspective used by Thrasher's (1963) classic study as exemplified in the quote used to open this article. Arguably, one of the important differences between delinquent group members and gang members may be found in the higher number of organizational features found in the latter.

### Theoretical background

At the core of the group process perspective is the idea that groups of any kind have certain properties which affect the behavior of its members (Klein and Crawford, 1967; Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Short and Strodbeck, 1965). Group properties are created from the patterning of interactions between members, and these effects on behavior cannot be understood outside of the group dynamics from which they were created<sup>1</sup> (Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Short and Strodbeck, 1965). This is the idea behind the social facilitation hypothesis that little differentiates gang members from non-gang members before they join the gang (Thornberry et al., 1993). The challenge is then to find out which properties of delinquent groups and gangs are conducive to delinquency and the nature of the mechanisms underlying this effect on behavior. The review of research on group processes identified at least four types of mechanisms in which membership may increase the number of crime opportunities for its members: 1) exposure to collective violence and status management; 2) group cohesiveness; 3) interactions with highly delinquent peers; 4) organization. The fourth mechanism will receive more extensive treatment as it is the main focus of the current article.

The first mechanism, exposure to collective violence and status management, recognizes the centrality of conflicts and violence in gang life.<sup>2</sup> Gang members, more than any other young offenders, are involved in violent conflicts, whether the issue is considered from an offending (Decker, 1996; Hughes and Short, 2005; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003) or a victimization standpoint (Miller and Decker, 2001; Peterson, Taylor & Esbensen, 2004; Rosenfeld, Bray, & Egley, 1999). Conflicts may develop for a variety of reasons, most of them related to normative violations, identity attacks, or retaliation (Decker, 1996; Hughes and Short, 2005). The important point for the purpose of this article is that gang members are exposed to violence based on their membership in a gang/group, not necessarily because of any of their own individual actions.<sup>3</sup> As Decker (1996) put it, “the gang’s collective liability for wrong done to rival members expands the pool of potential victims and increases the threats of retaliatory violence” (p. 248). Status considerations are important because simple exposure to collective violence does not quite explain why members actually participate. The group provides young offenders with a new found status, a reference group which becomes central to their identity as adolescents (Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Short and Strodbeck, 1965). To maintain their status, group members are expected to embrace the group’s attitudes and goals, to be active participants in group activities, which sometimes include violence and other delinquent activities (Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Short and Strodbeck, 1965). As such, an individual entering with a low inclination for violence may end up actively participating in violent conflicts if the tendencies of the group are as such.<sup>4</sup> The termination of

membership removes such an exposure to violence and the incentives for participation related to status management.

A related, but nonetheless different mechanism appears to operate through group cohesion. Cohesion refers to group member’s commitment and attraction to the idea of the group (Hogg, 1992); it refers to a group’s *esprit de corps* (Klein, 1971) or “tightness” (Fleisher, 1998). The idea is that group cohesion encourages delinquency has often been offered as an explanation for the higher delinquency levels of gang members, but few gang researchers actually tested the idea empirically<sup>5</sup> (Klein and Maxson, 2006; for an exception, see Klein and Crawford, 1967). However, a vast literature on group cohesion and its effect on individual performance can be found in social psychology (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003; Mullen and Copper, 1994). The results from these studies are clear: cohesion is positively related to efficiency and performance in accomplishing group tasks (Beal et al., 2003), especially in smaller groups<sup>6</sup> (Mullen and Copper, 1994). This is consistent with Klein’s long-held view that gang cohesiveness leads to higher delinquency levels for members (see Klein and Crawford, 1967; Klein and Maxson, 2006). Cohesiveness increases the efficiency of communication and coordination in the realization of group-related goals. A cohesive group can expect more from each of its member, both in terms of productivity and in willingness to take risk for the benefit of the group. As suggested by Decker’s (1996) escalation hypothesis, cohesiveness and delinquency may also be mutually reinforcing: a violent threat may increase group cohesion, which then leads to further involvement in (retaliatory) violence. Important for our purposes is that group cohesion appears to be an important channel through which individuals increase their delinquency levels while membership lasts, not after.

The third mechanism focuses on one of the most robust predictor of delinquency: delinquent peers (e.g., Agnew, 1991; Haynie, 2001; McGloin and O’Neill Shermer, 2009; Sarnecki, 2001; Thornberry et al., 1994; Warr, 2002; Weerman and Bijleveld, 2007; Zhang & Messner, 2000). The idea behind this mechanism is straightforward. Perhaps one reason why gang members are so criminally active is because they are surrounded and interact with the largest number of highly criminal friends. Once they become associated with a delinquent group, new members suddenly benefit from a much larger pool of potential associates than before, exposing them to more numerous, perhaps better crime opportunities. The availability of co-offenders has long been identified as key to an active (Piquero et al., 2007; Reiss, 1988; Warr, 2002), even successful criminal careers (Bouchard and Nguyen, 2010; Tremblay, 1993; Morselli and Tremblay, 2004). The delinquent peer hypothesis has been the object of systematic empirical testing. Using data from the Seattle Social Development Project, Battin and colleagues (1998) examined the unique contribution of gang membership to delinquency above and beyond association with delinquent friends. First, the authors found gang members to have significantly higher rates of violent offending, drug sales, general delinquency, and substance use compared to youths having other types of associations with delinquent peers. Second, gang membership was shown to have an independent effect on delinquent behavior that could not be explained through associations with delinquent peers. Other longitudinal research has replicated these findings (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003; see also Huizinga, Weiher, Espiritu, & Esbensen, 2003; Peterson et al., 2004).

The focus of the current article is on the role of a fourth potential mechanism: organization. Organization refers specifically to the “work environment” of and the extent to which it is structured to facilitate crime. This view does not assume that gangs are *organizations*, or that gangs are *organized*, a position which would go against what most empirical research has found on gangs and delinquency (Decker et al., 1998; Fagan, 1989; Klein and Maxson, 2006; for a different view, see Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). It simply hypothesizes that gangs which are able to bring some order, some planning, or

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