



## Targeting youth at risk for gang involvement: Validation of a gang risk assessment to support individualized secondary prevention☆



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 May 2015

Received in revised form 3 July 2015

Accepted 4 July 2015

Available online 17 July 2015

#### Keywords:

Gang joining  
Street gang prevention  
Secondary gang prevention  
Violence prevention  
Youth at risk  
Gang risk assessment

### ABSTRACT

**Objective/Purpose:** A major challenge in economically marginalized neighborhoods across the United States and around the world is the proliferation of local street gangs and the violence they perpetuate. While estimates vary from place to place, in the United States approximately 10% to 19% of youth between the ages of 12 and 16 are likely to join a local street gang in these high-risk areas. While a substantial proportion of those who join a gang drop out relatively quickly (within a year or so), others remain involved over several years. Prolonged involvement in a street gang frequently results in violent injury or death among gang-involved youth and among innocent victims. Communities and families facing these problems are looking for ways to discourage gang involvement before it starts.

**Methods:** Here we report a test of the prospective validity of an assessment that supports concentrated prevention efforts focused on the youth most likely to join a gang. This approach, called secondary gang prevention, works intensively to remediate influences that motivate high-risk youth to join a neighborhood gang. The prospective validity of the Gang Risk of Entry Factors (GREF) assessment was tested over a 12 to 18 month period (baseline to retest) in a high-risk sample of 11 to 16 year old youth in Los Angeles County.

**Results:** The findings confirm the assessment's effectiveness in prospectively identifying the youth most likely to join a gang within impacted communities. In the study sample, 100% of the boys who reported current gang membership, 81% of boys who report former gang membership, and 74% of the boys who reported hanging out with the gang at the posttest had been identified as high-risk 12 to 18 months earlier on the baseline assessment. All but one of the 14 girls in the study who reported any gang involvement (including just hanging out) on the posttest had been assessed as high-risk on the baseline interview.

**Conclusions:** The findings confirm the assessment's effectiveness in prospectively identifying the youth most likely to join a gang within impacted communities.

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## 1. Introduction

A recent report from the National Institute of Justice stresses the need to strengthen gang prevention strategies across the United States (Simon, Ritter, and Mahendra, 2013). In this report, Howell (2013) estimates that there has been a 35% increase in the number of youth street gangs nationwide between 2002 and 2010. In particular, Howell highlights the need “more intensive or selected prevention programs” to reach youth who are most at risk of gang involvement (7–8). In the same report, Leap (2013) stresses the importance of community-

based strategies. She argues that gangs are often thought of as a group separate from their community. As a result of this thinking, many programs that address gang problems have tended to be deterrence-heavy attempts to move gangs out of the community (105). Instead, Leap argues that more attention should be paid to strategies that help prevent children from joining gangs in the first place – strategies implemented right in their own communities.

Access to general prevention and youth development programs that are open to all interested youth is not uncommon in most neighborhoods, but this level of prevention alone is often not enough to prevent high-risk youth from joining a gang. Primary prevention generally lacks the intensity and focus needed to address the needs of high-risk youth (see Esbensen, Osgood, Peterson, Taylor, and Carson, 2013). Anecdotal evidence suggests that youth who are most likely to join a gang may choose not to engage in available primary prevention programs, and when high-risk youth do engage, their attendance is often not sustained. Further, general prevention providers should consider the

☆ This project was supported by Award No. 2008-IJ-CX-0016 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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pros and cons of including young clients in primary prevention settings who are already moving toward gang involvement or appear to be active in this regard.

Several researchers have documented concerns about the negative influence aggressive or antisocial youth can have in contexts where they freely interact with less aggressive youth, a dynamic called deviancy training (Dishion and Dodge, 2005; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, and Spraklen, 1997; Dishion, McCord, and Poulin, 1999; Dodge, Dishion, and Lansford, 2006; Hennigan, Kolnick, Tian, Maxson, and Poplawski, 2010; Piehler and Dishion, 2007). Some researchers have demonstrated that discrepancy-proportional peer influence, defined by controlled contexts where a majority of less aggressive youth can be effective in highly structured group settings (see Boxer, Guerra, Huesmann, & Morales, 2005), however this dynamic appears to be rare in naturally-occurring youth group settings. More typical are situations where high-risk youth are free to interact with other youth without structure or supervision. If programs group high risk youth together, informal interactions are likely to encourage deviant behavior (e.g., negative influence through exposure to talk about the powerful or exciting aspects of being in a gang, with little or no recognition of the downside).

We argue here that successful prevention of gang-joining is important because once a youth becomes invested in a gang, the consequences of gang involvement often become serious and not easily reversed. Augustyn, Thornberry, and Krohn (2014) documented both the immediate negative outcomes associated with joining gangs in adolescence as well as the implications this has over the life course. They report that specific negative outcomes prevalent among youth who join gangs in adolescence include dropping out of high school, teenage cohabitation, and teenage parenthood. Their research confirms that these premature transitions to adulthood coupled with participation in gang-related events during adolescence perpetuate a pattern of maltreatment on their own children years later. Thornberry and Henry (2013) report that the odds are high that victims of adolescent maltreatment in one generation often perpetuate the practice of maltreatment on to the next. Thus adolescent gang involvement may trigger and sustain cycles of dysfunction and maltreatment over generations.

Klein and Maxson (2006) suggest that successful secondary gang prevention requires: a) determining the right locations for secondary prevention programs within or very near the neighborhoods with active street gangs; b) focusing on the array of behaviors, attitudes and social contexts related to gang joining; and c) identifying and engaging those individuals most likely to join a street gang, based on empirical knowledge. Street gangs are typically found in communities with social and economic deficits (e.g., poverty, disorder, violence and unemployment) that nurture and sustain gang joining. These communities are challenged by the powerful intergroup dynamics that play out within and especially between neighborhoods (Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga, 2013). Inter-gang competition sustains threats and violence which reinforce and stimulate participation (Decker and van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1995). Setting up more intensive programs in neighborhoods like these presents significant challenges for local social service agencies, schools and law enforcement. However, it is precisely in or near these neighborhoods that secondary prevention programs focused intensively on individual clients (and their families) are most needed.

Even in gang-impacted neighborhoods many youth who participate in delinquent and criminal behavior are not – and do not become – involved in street gangs. Joining and participating in a street gang involves dynamic processes that extend beyond engagement in crime and delinquency alone. Youth in the process of joining a street gang are subject to group influences that motivate and sustain activities well beyond what an individual might otherwise choose to do outside of the gang context. In one study, for example, Hennigan and Sloane (2013) found that level of participation in crime and violence among gang-involved youth in their study was mediated by the strength of identification with the gang (gang identity) regardless of their perception of the likelihood of getting caught and punished. Non-gang youth

from the same neighborhoods were deterred from involvement in crime, apparently due in part to their perceptions of the likelihood of getting caught and punished – but this was not a deterrent for the gang-involved youth. In short, a gang member's cognitive and emotional bonds with the gang trump his or her own individual proclivities (Decker, 1996; Decker and van Winkle, 1996; Hennigan and Spanovic, 2012; Klein and Crawford, 1967; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb, 2014; Vigil, 1988, 2002).

Esbensen et al. compared levels of violence in a large sample of youth involved in street gangs to a sample of non-gang youth who were also involved in violent activities (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, and Freng, 2009). They conclude that it takes a greater push for youth to become involved in a street gang than to become involved in violence in general. Their data suggest that gang-involved youth have a greater number of risky attitudes and behaviors overall. Their analyses show that certain risk factors are more strongly related to violence among gang members than among violent non-gang youth (i.e., guilt neutralization and commitment to negative peers). Major reviews of the literature on gang-related risk factors (e.g., Klein and Maxson, 2006; Krohn and Thornberry, 2008) make clear that it is an accumulation of multiple risks that distinguish those involved in gangs from similarly-situated youth. These findings suggest that secondary prevention programs can concentrate on reducing gang joining by focusing on the subset of youth with an accumulation of multiple risks that have been associated with joining a gang. However, there has been no reliable method to determine which youth exhibit this accumulation of risks.

Lipsey's (2009) meta-analysis confirmed that program failures have been associated with an inability to actually enroll youth with high risks. It is not unusual to find that well-placed and well-intentioned programs have failed to reach the youth who need help the most. For example, Melde, Gavazzi, McGarrell, and Bynum (2011) document that the common practice of enrolling youth based solely on referrals, even those from high-risk areas, often misses the youth most in need. Reliably identifying high-risk youth has presented unexpected challenges.

This paper reports a test of the prospective validity of the recently developed Gang Risk of Entry Factors (GREF) assessment that is designed specifically to identify high-risk youth, prone to joining a street gang.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the assessment is to enable secondary gang prevention programs to concentrate their resources on those high-risk and hard-to-reach youth who are most likely to join local gangs. This is especially important because even in communities with a significant gang presence, a relatively small percentage of youth actually become actively affiliated with a gang. While estimates of the prevalence of gang joining vary from one study to the next, Klein and Maxson's (2006) review suggests that somewhere around 10% to 19% (averaged across sex) of youth in areas with a significant gang presence may succumb to the temptations or pressures to join a gang during adolescence. Gang joining is most prevalent between the ages of 12 and 16 (Esbensen et al., 2009; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz and Sweeten, 2015). Secondary prevention programs are specifically designed to recruit and intervene with high-risk youth prior to gang joining, roughly between the ages of 10 and 16. The purpose of the GREF assessment is to allow programs to work intensively with the subset of youth who are most likely to join a street gang. The GREF assessment includes eight key risk factors and a self-report delinquency scale to identify youth with risk profiles that match the profiles of youth who joined street gangs across multiple longitudinal studies reviewed by Klein and Maxson (2006) and Krohn and Thornberry (2008).

The initial processes of developing and pilot testing the GREF assessment over a two-year period are reported elsewhere (Hennigan, Maxson, Sloane, Kolnick, and Vindel, 2014). The nine factors included

<sup>1</sup> The GREF Assessment is called the YSET (Youth Services Eligibility Tool) in the context of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) Program. The assessment was developed and its concurrent validity has been tested in the context of the Los Angeles GRYD Program over a 3 to 4 year period. See Hennigan et al. (2014) for details.

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