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The role of delinquency, proactive aggression, psychopathy and behavioral school engagement in reported youth gang membership



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ABSTRACT

Given the robust positive association between gangs and crime, a better understanding of factors related to reported youth gang membership is critical and especially since youth in gangs are a universal concern. The present study investigated the role of delinquency, proactive aggression, psychopathy and behavioral school engagement in reported youth gang membership using a large sample of 1027 Singapore adolescents. Results from logistic regression showed that delinquency, proactive aggression, and behavioral school engagement were statistically significant risk factors for reported youth gang membership, and that psychopathy was not related to reported gang membership. Implications for prevention and intervention work with respect to youth gang membership were discussed. In particular, strengthening students' engagement with school and meaningful school-related activities and developing supportive teacher–student relationships are particularly important in working with young people with respect to prevention work. Additionally, the present study's theoretical and empirical contributions were also discussed.

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Youths involved in gangs are a universal concern because of the disproportionate number of serious and violent offenses associated with these individuals (Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002; Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013; White & Mason, 2006). In the United States, there has been an exponential growth of youth gang activity across various cities since 1990, and researchers have suggested that prevalence rates of youth gang membership vary between 2% and 37% (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). There is an extensive body of research documenting the problems posed by youth gangs in the United States; in particular, the gang–crime relationship is well documented (Thornberry et al., 2003). Beyond issues related to offending, the burden on society is also very high taking into consideration economic, social, mental health, criminal justice and other related costs (Durlak, 1997).

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Similar concerns related to youth gangs have been reported internationally. Gatti, Haymoz, and Schadee (2011) reported that across 30 countries, the deviant youth gang involvement prevalence rates ranged between 0.4% and 17%. White and Mason (2006) examined the problem of youth gangs in Perth, Australia, and found that youth gang members accounted for a far greater proportion of criminal acts in comparison to non-gang members. Additionally, the likelihood of gang members being involved in a fight recently was five times that of non-gang members. Likewise, Pyrooz and Decker (2013) found that gang involved youths in China report a higher tendency to engage in delinquency than their non-gang counterparts. In Singapore, youths can come together to form what they freely term as 'gangs' (Singapore Police Force, 2010). Like secret societies, youth gangs in Singapore usually adopt a Hokkien-dialect or numeric names and have unique passwords, tattoos, and hand signals that their members use (Subordinate Courts, 1998). Even though youth gangs in Singapore mimic secret societies in some ways, they are also different in some other respects; for example, they tend to be far more loosely organized in terms of hierarchy and structure, and may not follow the traditional initiation rights and rituals that are more definitive of triads and secret societies. Because of the restriction on use of firearms and guns in Singapore, gang participation in fights and rioting are more common. Therefore, the Singapore Police Force views rioting cases as an estimated gauge of gang violence and prevalence (Parliament of Singapore, 2010). A report from the Singapore Police Force stated that between 2005 and 2010, the percentage of rioting cases that were gang-related averaged at around 30% (Parliament of Singapore, 2010). Taken together, given the well-established positive association between gangs and crime internationally, a deeper understanding of factors related to youth gang membership is not only timely but crucial.

There is a rich body of work highlighting links between delinquency and a related cluster of characteristics on the one hand and gang membership on the other. Recent reviews have shown that across international boundaries, consistent findings have emerged suggesting that youths who belong to a gang have intensified delinquency as compared to youths who are not involved in gangs (for reviews please see O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013; Wong, Toh, Hung, & Ang, 2013). Two studies will be highlighted here to illustrate this. Curry et al. (2002) for example, surveyed youths from middle schools in St. Louis during 1995–1996 with respect to self-reported delinquency and self-reported gang membership. Additionally, these researchers also examined official delinquency records of their study sample. Findings showed that 65% of gang members reported to have used violence against another individual compared to the 25.4% reported by youths who were not involved in gangs. It was also reported that 48.8% of gang members had official records of delinquency compared to 24.9% of non-gang members. Overall, Curry et al.'s results indicated that there was a strong and positive association between both self-reported and officially recorded delinquency and gang involvement. In a different study, Gordon et al. (2004) examined longitudinal data of 858 participants from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, collected over a period of 10 years. These researchers studied delinquent behavior before, during, and after gang membership, across gang members and non-gang members, and controlled for trends associated with age and time. Gordon et al. found that youth gang members in comparison to non-gang members not only had higher rates of delinquency prior to entering gangs, but these levels of delinquency also increased during the period of active gang membership. Therefore, there is robust empirical evidence documenting a strong link between delinquency and gang involvement.

Besides delinquency, there are other related characteristics such as aggression and psychopathy that have been implicated in youth gang membership. With respect to aggression, researchers have drawn the distinction between proactive and reactive aggression with each typology having distinct motivations. Proactive aggression has been described as instrumental, calculated, and motivated by external reward while reactive aggression has been described as impulsive and a hostile reaction to provocation (Dodge & Coie, 1987). The collective body of work on proactive and reactive aggression appear to suggest that in particular, proactive aggression rather than reactive aggression is related to the perpetration of antisocial acts such as drug and property crimes and bullying (e.g., Miller & Lynam, 2006). We had previously reviewed that there is a strong and robust relationship between delinquency, crime, and gang involvement (Curry et al., 2002; O'Brien et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2013). Consistently, research studies have shown that gang-affiliated youth were found to be more likely to hold criminal attitudes, attitudes supportive of violence, and positive attitudes towards gangs (Anderson & Huesmann, 2007; Chu, Daffern, Thomas, Ang, & Long, 2014). In a related body of work, Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, and Schwartz (2011) found that bully and bully-victim groups scored significantly higher on proactive aggression compared to victim and control groups. Cumulative evidence also suggests that both bullies and bully-victims engage in more antisocial and criminal behavior compared to victims and controls (e.g., Haynie et al., 2001; O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009). Therefore, findings in related bodies of research work collectively suggest that the link between proactive aggression and gang membership is plausible.

Even though evidence strongly suggests a positive association between proactive rather than reactive aggression and gang membership, it should be noted that theoretically, the proactive-reactive aggression distinction is one that has been debated in the field. While some researchers argue that reactive and proactive aggression differ in meaningful ways (Baker, Raine, Liu, & Jacobsen, 2008), other researchers question whether reactive and proactive aggression have too much conceptual convergence (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). A critical empirical question concerns whether reactive and proactive aggression are indeed associated with differential correlates.

Psychopathy is a construct that is closely related to proactive aggression; high proactive aggression scores have been found to correspond with higher incidence of psychopathic traits (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2014; Raine, Dodge, Loeber, Reynolds, & Loeber, 2006; Seah & Ang, 2008). Psychopathy is defined by antisocial, impulsive behavior, and a cluster of temperamental variables of callousness, low empathic regard, narcissism, and low emotionality (Hare, 1991). Research demonstrating links between psychopathy and gang membership have been mixed. On the one hand, there is empirical evidence suggesting that youth psychopathy is an important risk factor for gang involvement, and serious and violent offending behaviors (e.g., Salekin,

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