



YOUTH GANGS, DRUG USE, AND DELINQUENCY

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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the relationship among youth gangs, drug use, and delinquency by focusing on: (1) the effects of prior drug use and delinquency on gang membership; (2) the effect of gang membership on drug use and delinquency; and (3) the interaction effects of prior drug use and delinquency with gang membership on drug use and delinquency. Using data from the first two waves of the Buffalo Longitudinal Survey of Young Men, the present study assessed these three models. The data indicate that prior delinquency significantly affects gang membership, while prior drug use has no effect on gang membership. Gang membership has an effect on subsequent delinquency and drug use, although its effect on subsequent delinquency is fairly modest. Finally, there are interaction effects between gang membership and prior delinquency/drug use on subsequent delinquency/drug use. The nature of these interaction effects indicate that gang membership has a stronger effect on youths who have not committed delinquency and facilitates drug use only for those who have not used. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

It has been long recognized that gang membership is related to delinquent involvement.

Since the pioneering work of Thrasher (1927) in Chicago, observational studies and studies relying on official data and using survey data consistently indicate that gang members are more

likely to commit crime and, more recently, to be involved in drug use and trafficking (see Spergel 1990:193–9, for a detailed review of these studies). There are consistent findings, though there is little research to address the causal mechanisms by which both are related (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993). Thornberry et al. (1993) identified and specified, based on social control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969), group pressure perspective (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965), and some other typical studies of youth gangs (e.g., Sarnecki, 1990; Yablonsky, 1962), three somewhat competing models that could account for the relationship between gang membership and delinquent involvement. These three models were called: *selection or kind of person model*; *social facilitation or kind of group model*; and *enhancement model*, respectively.

Thornberry et al. tested for these three models with use of data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, though the analysis leaves room for further research on the three models. The present study attempted to extend that study by further specifying these three models and testing them with use of a different data set from the Buffalo Longitudinal Survey of Young Men (BLSYM).

THEORETICAL MODELS

Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the academic community and the public have had renewed interest in gangs and gang-related crime after relatively less attention to gang-related problems during the 1970s (Horowitz, 1990; Huff, 1990). This renewed interest inspired studies of the gang problem (e.g., Bowker and Klein, 1983; Fagan, 1989; Hagedorn, 1988; Klein and Maxson, 1989; Morash, 1983; Vigil, 1988; Winfree, Vigil, and Mays, 1991). These studies have provided evidence that gangs are associated with delinquent involvement, violent crime, and drug use, but, as Thornberry et al. (1993) and Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) argued, some basic causal mechanisms linking gang membership and delinquency remained unknown. These mechanisms are concerned with

whether delinquent youths seek out gangs or whether gangs facilitate delinquency. To address these mechanisms, Thornberry et al. (1993) identified and specified three theoretical models derived from social control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969), the group pressure perspective (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965), and some other studies of youth gangs (e.g., Sarnecki, 1990; Yablonsky, 1962). These three models propose somewhat different perspectives on the relationship between gang membership and delinquent involvement.

The first one, a *selection or kind of person model*, assumes that delinquent youths seek out gangs. Gang members are more likely to engage in delinquency than nongang members because they were already delinquent before they joined gangs. The hypothesis is that delinquency increases the probability of being a gang member rather than gang membership leading to delinquency involvement. The second model is called *social facilitation or kind of group model*. The model “posits that gang members are intrinsically no different from nongang members in terms of delinquency or drug use” (Thornberry et al., 1993:58). Gang affiliation is a major cause of delinquency. The hypothesis derived from this model is that the gang is a criminogenic peer group that provides group pressure and drives youths to delinquency. The third model is the *enhancement model* that mixes the first two models. This model hypothesizes that gang members were already delinquent before they joined the gang, but gang affiliation enhanced delinquency.

Using data from a panel study in Rochester, New York, Thornberry et al. (1993) assessed these three models by comparing rates of delinquency across three time periods in which adolescents were nongang members, transient gang members, and stable gang members. They hypothesized that if rates of delinquency significantly changed along with active gang membership across the different time periods, the social facilitation model was supported. Otherwise, the selection model was supported. If gang members “have generally higher rates of delinquency and drug use than nongang members, but especially high rates when they are active gang members” (Thornberry et al., 1993:65),

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