

Blood In, Blood Out? Why Youth Join Gangs and How They Leave

During the next 12 months, hundreds of thousands of adolescent boys and girls will join gangs or form new ones. That's the bad news. The good news: nearly all will tire of the violence or outgrow their gang fascination, and most will do so in a year or less. Contrary to popular myth, the vast majority will not face the threat of violence from their gang brethren when they leave, although they may continue to be targeted by rivals. And many will meet hostile treatment from social institutions that refuse to accept their status as former gang members.

Joining

Prevalence of gang membership

Most youth do not join gangs, but the appeal of ganging crosses demographic and geographic lines.

Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson emphasize that gang members do not make up a majority of youth, even among high-risk groups in urban settings: “Perhaps the strongest message in this research is that even with unrestricted definitions in high-risk populations, most youth—7 or 8 out of 10—do *not* join gangs throughout adolescence” (2006). On the other hand, gangs claim a sizable minority of youth, and the appeal of ganging crosses demographic and geographic lines.

Nationwide, 7 percent of whites and 12 percent of blacks and Latinos report current or past gang membership by the age of 17 (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). Urban and rural adolescents were equally likely to report current or past gang membership, and white youth participated in gangs at high enough rates to make them the largest group of adolescent gang members. Gang involvement is greater among high-risk youth and in communities where gang activity is prevalent. For example, nearly a third of boys and girls who participated in the Rochester Youth Survey joined gangs at some point during their adolescence (Thornberry 2001a).

Most gang members join between the ages of 12 and 15.

The public is scandalized each time it is reported that gangs are recruiting children. Yet ganging has always been an adolescent pursuit—a developmental phase through which many youth pass on their way to adulthood. The overwhelming majority of gang members join between the ages of 12 and 15, according to Terence Thornberry (personal communication). Klein notes:

For many decades, the initial entry into gangs has been at around 11 years of age (initial, not typical), and so there is little room for change downward. Although some writers and officials decry the 8- and 10-year-old gang member, they haven't been in the business long enough to realize that we heard the same reports twenty and forty years ago. (1995)

Risk factors

A number of risk factors are associated with gang membership, but no single factor or set of factors can successfully predict which youth will become gang members. The variables that correlated most strongly with gang membership among participants in the Rochester Youth Survey included negative life events, positive values about drugs, and association with delinquent peers (Thornberry 2001b).¹ The most powerful protective factors were education-related and included commitment to school, attachment to teachers, and parents' expectations for school.

Researchers working on the Seattle Social Development Project found similar results (Thornberry 2001b). Availability of drugs, externalizing behaviors, learning disabilities, having “bad” peers, hyperactivity, and low school commitment were

¹ Delinquent behavior also correlates strongly to gang membership; this relationship is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

associated with gang membership.² Social competence, conventional beliefs, and attachment to conventional peers significantly reduced the likelihood of gang involvement.

Thornberry notes that gang membership is strongly associated with problems across multiple domains. The Rochester Youth Survey research team found that “a majority (61 percent) of the boys and 40 percent of the girls who scored above the median in seven risk factor domains were gang members” (cited in Wyrick and Howell 2004). The variables that predicted gang membership among Rochester and Seattle youth survey participants were concentrated in the peer, school, and personal domains. But the role of community factors (such as availability of drugs and neighborhood integration) and family factors (such as supervision, parental attachment to the child, proviolent attitudes, and family instability) was also significant. To put it another way, gang members are youth for whom everything is going wrong.

Thornberry’s findings fit the experience of Jesuit priest Father Greg Boyle, who founded Homeboy Industries, a program that provides employment opportunities to current and former gang members who want to leave the gang life. Father Boyle observes that what sets gang members apart from other youth is their misery (Boyle 2005). According to Boyle, such youth do not need to be recruited—much less forced—to join a gang. They are the kids who hang around older gang members hoping to be noticed and invited into the circle.

Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor also examined correlates of gang membership using a set of demographic, social learning, and self-control variables, along with the five definitions of gang membership described in chapter 4 (2001). The researchers found that race and family structure were statistically significant predictors of gang membership, but that these factors did not predict the intensity of gang involvement. There were no statistically significant relationships between measures of self-control (impulsivity, parental monitoring, and risk-seeking) and gang involvement under any of the five definitions of gang membership.

Youth who reported having delinquent peers were more likely to report gang membership under each definition. By contrast, having prosocial peers appeared to have no effect on the likelihood of gang involvement among GREAT survey participants.

² Race and gender also correlate to gang membership, as discussed in chapter 4.

The other variables that successfully predicted gang membership under all five definitions were tolerance of fighting and a weak sense of guilt. The results suggest that what distinguishes the most deeply involved gang members from peers is a worldview in which fighting is a normal part of life and the rules of mainstream society do not fully apply.

Leaving

It is commonly believed that gang membership is a one-way street leading inevitably to death or jail. This myth is perpetuated not only by the media but also by gang members who exaggerate the stakes of membership in order to underscore the importance and permanence of their collective bond:

During the course of the interviews, many gang members expressed the belief that it is impossible to leave the gang. A number of subjects told us that the only way to exit the gang was to be killed. Such beliefs have their foundation in the role of threats of violence for maintaining gang solidarity and membership in the face of threatened and informal sanctions. (Decker and Van Winkle 1996)

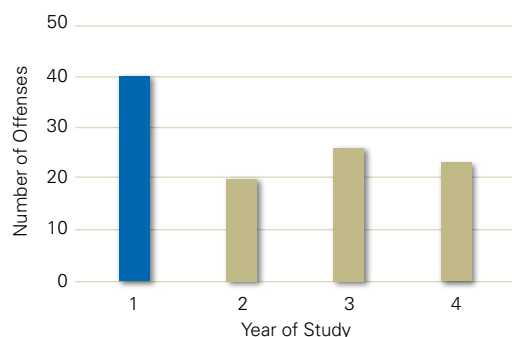
Nothing could be further from the truth. Decker and Van Winkle continue, “*Despite such statements, the majority of active gang members (63 percent) told us they knew at least one person who had left their own gang*” (emphasis added). Data from national and local youth surveys indicate that the typical gang member is active for a year or less. Esbensen and his colleagues identified as many former gang members as current gang members in a multisite sample of more than 5,000 eighth-graders (Esbensen et al. 2001). The Rochester Youth Survey research team, which tracked 1,000 high-risk youth into adulthood, found that a large majority of members quit after a brief stay in the gang:

Gang membership turned out to be a rather fleeting experience for most of these youth. Half of the male gang members reported being in a gang for 1 year or less, and only 7 percent reported being a gang member for all 4 years. Two-thirds (66 percent) of the females were in a gang for 1 year or less and none reported being a member for all 4 years. (Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004)

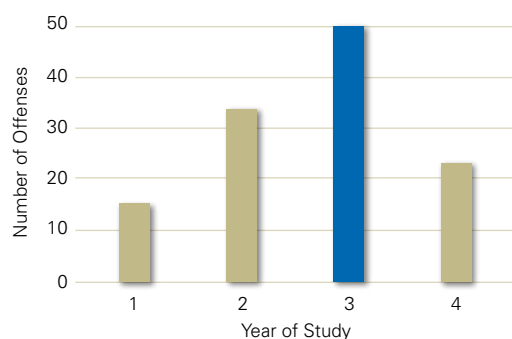
Huizinga reports similar results from the Denver Youth Survey sample of over 1,500 at-risk youth

Figure 5.1. Offenses committed by youth during years of gang involvement and noninvolvement

Gang members in year 1 only



Gang members in year 3 only



Source: Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004

(personal communication). Three in five males (60 percent) and nearly four in five females (78 percent) quit after one or two years. One in six remained involved for three to four years (15 percent of males and 18 percent of females). A quarter of males and just 4 percent of females stayed with the gang for five or more years. By way of comparison, the turnover rate among new gang members exceeded the 47 percent turnover rate for workers in the hospitality and leisure industry (U.S. Department of Labor 2006).

Leaving a gang is associated with a sharp reduction in delinquent activity. Thornberry and his colleagues observed that, among youth who were involved during a single year, overall delinquency fell by *half* after they left the gang (Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004). The Rochester research team also found that gang youth report higher rates of offenses against persons only during years of active gang involvement (Thornberry 2001a).

Delinquency rates also fell sharply among Seattle youth who quit gangs for all offense types except drug sales (cited in Thornberry 2001a). Denver youth

gang members committed the overwhelming majority of their delinquent acts (80 percent or more) during periods of gang involvement, even though most were active for a year or less (Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004).

Why youth quit gangs

It is surprising that more attention has not been devoted to the question of why and how youth leave gangs. The salutary effect of desistance from gang membership is reason enough to pursue a research and policy agenda that aims to accelerate turnover among gang members. Yet the gang literature is practically devoid of research on desistance. The primary source of information on leaving the gang is a set of interviews conducted by Scott Decker and Barry Van Winkle in the early 1990s with 99 current and 24 former St. Louis gang members (1996). Results that are based on such a narrow sample cannot claim to be authoritative, but they do provide a helpful point of departure for thinking about desistance from gang activity.

A single factor dominated the responses of former gang members who were asked why they gave up the gang life: “All twenty-one individuals who answered this question told us, flat out, that their experience with violence had been the primary motivation for leaving the gang.” This finding is at first surprising since researchers have long noted that violence can *strengthen* cohesion among gang members.

Decker and Van Winkle resolve the apparent contradiction by making a distinction between violence that brings gang members together and violence that splinters individuals from the group. They argue that “internal” violence (initiation rites, for example) and “mythic” violence (tales of battles between gangs) intensify gang bonds, but the impact of real violence—whether the gang members experience it directly, or indirectly by way of friends and family—is quite different. The following was a fairly typical response to the question “Why did you decide to leave the gang?”:

Well after I got shot, I got shot in my leg. You know how your life just flash? It like did that so I stopped selling dope, got a job, stayed in school, just stopped hanging around cause one day I know some other gang member catch me and probably kill me.

Interviews with gang members who participated in the Denver Youth Survey provide another glimpse of leaving a gang. Huizinga reports that 30 to 40 per-

cent of former gang members identified maturation as their main motive for leaving the gang (personal communication). These individuals described having “grown up,” “grown out of it,” taken on “new responsibilities,” or simply “got[ten] too old” for the gang life. The maturation process was often linked to having children. Safety concerns accounted for the second-largest set of responses, and moves to new neighborhoods or out of the city also played a role in some cases.

The St. Louis and Denver interviews of former gang members share one critical feature: mention of motives related to law enforcement or the criminal justice system (fear of arrest or incarceration, for example) was almost entirely absent. Decker and Van Winkle make no reference to deterrence-related motives in their description of desistance from gang membership. Huizinga observes that such motives were mentioned by about 10 percent of those interviewed, often in conjunction with other motives (personal communication).

These findings point to a mismatch between traditional gang control policies, which seek to deter gang activity through the use of criminal justice sanctions, and the reality of gang membership. The research team that worked on the Denver Youth Survey found little evidence that arrest or incarceration can deter delinquency or gang membership (Huizinga, personal communication). Huizinga describes the group's findings:

For gang members, it is the same as for other youth: very little effect, especially for incarceration. They don't see [the criminal justice system] as weak or a paper tiger...but there is a litany, especially from gang members, that being arrested and incarcerated is just to be expected—a rite of passage. In our qualitative research we asked what they learned. The answer was to run next time, to be more careful. They figured out one more thing to do to avoid apprehension. Some say they learned things, especially while incarcerated, and made contacts. (Personal communication)

Ironically, *active* gang members interviewed by Decker and Van Winkle were likely to endorse traditional gang control tactics as effective means to deter gang membership (1996). The gang members' top suggestions were to “(1) talk to individuals about the hazards of life in the gang, [and] (2) provide stricter punishments or discipline for those considering joining the gang.” 8 Ball, a 15-year-old Hoover Gang-

ster Crip, suggests that other youth could be “scared straight” despite the fact that the tactic had failed with him:

8 Ball: You have to talk to them so you have to catch them at an early age and show them. Bring in some guy that got shot up in a gang, “Look what happened to me, a broken jaw or broken bones and stuff.” You got to talk to them. There was a movie called *Scared Straight* and I looked at that and it kind of changed my mind about everything.

Interviewer: But you are still in the gang.

8 Ball: Yeah because I didn't trip off that because I was young then. I keep telling myself that I'm going to stop, that's what I be saying. I'm going to try to stop, but that's hard to do. You got your reputation.

When it came to eliminating the gangs, “the modal response was that violence would be the most effective means.” One gang member asserted that authorities would have to “smoke us all,” while another suggested the only solution would be to “put them in one place and blow them up.” Conflict with authorities clearly fit easily within the apocalyptic worldview of active gang members, while the mundane reality of maturation did not.

How youth quit gangs

Current gang members interviewed by Decker and Van Winkle maintained that gang members must be “beaten out” or “shoot a close relative, usually a parent.” But the researchers found “little evidence that leaving the gang requires group consent.” Former gang members “scoffed at these notions, particularly the obligation to shoot a parent as a condition of leaving a gang.”

Two-thirds of former members (13 of 19) indicated that they “just quit” the gang, while the next-largest group said that they had moved to another state (4 of 19). Just two former gang members reported having been formally “beaten out” of the gang. The following was a fairly typical exchange between an interviewer and a former gang member:

Interviewer: How did you get out?

Ex007: You just stop claiming.

Interviewer: That's all?

Ex007: See, that's stupid shit. Them young people. They fickle-minded, they don't know shit. I ain't got to kill shit [to get out of the gang].

Huizinga reports somewhat different results from interviews with former gang members in Denver (personal correspondence). Some interviewees described opting to be “beat out” of the gang, often for the sake of children whom they “don’t want to end up like [themselves].” The process of being beat out did not appear to deter most youth from leaving the gang, since a large majority of Denver members quit before the age of 18.

The principal barrier to leaving a gang is not fear of punishment by the gang but the difficulty many gang members face when they try to make new lives for themselves. Decker and Lauritsen observe that leaving the gang may require “rejecting one’s friends and peers” (1996). Yet mainstream social institutions are reluctant to embrace former gang members. Thus former gang members experience the worst of both worlds: “After all, what incentive is there to leave the gang when it is the source of their friends and when past criminal activities committed as gang members cause many groups to treat them as if they remained in the gang?”

Identification of gang members is seen as an essential tool in gang intervention efforts. But the gang label can make it more difficult for youth to leave the gang. Former gang members may be targeted by law enforcement long after their active participation in the gang has ended. Gang education efforts may dissuade employers from offering jobs to former gang members or youth who merely look like gang members. The refusal of major social institutions to recognize a former gang member’s new status can even filter down to rival gangs:

Police and school officials may not be aware of the decision of individuals to leave the gang or may not take such claims seriously, and records may not be purged of prior gang status. In such cases, the institution continues to treat the individuals as a gang member. When representatives of official agencies (e.g. police, school) identify an individual as a gang member, they are sending a powerful signal to rival gang members as well as to people in the community about the gang involvement of that person. Such a symbol may have consequences for how that individual is treated.

Consequences of gang membership

The negative consequences of past gang involvement persisted well into adulthood for participants in the Rochester Youth Survey (Thornberry, personal communication). At the age of 30, former gang members

were much more likely to report being unemployed, receiving welfare, committing crime, or carrying a gun than peers who had never joined a gang.

Thornberry reports that the risk of negative outcomes varied significantly depending on the duration of gang involvement. Males who spent a year or less in a gang were no more likely than nonmembers to be unemployed or receiving welfare by the time they reached 30. “Transient” gang males were more likely than nongang peers to report higher rates of delinquency and gun carrying at the age of 30, but they were less delinquent than “stable” gang peers. The Rochester Youth Survey’s pool of female gang members was too small to distinguish between the long-term consequences of transient and stable gang involvement.

Gang involvement clearly disrupts the lives of youth during a critical developmental period when they should be receiving an education, learning life skills, and taking on adult responsibilities. Thornberry’s findings indicate that much of the damage might be avoided if policy makers could figure out how to quickly and successfully move youth out of gangs. Decker concurs that we should set a high priority on “[getting] them out as quickly as we can” (personal communication).

Gang control policies that fix the gang label on youth do just the opposite: they keep former gang members from acquiring the social capital they need in order to survive in mainstream society. And they deter youth from leaving the gang by ensuring that they will be treated as pariahs no matter what they do. The scarcity of research on this topic provides further evidence that policy makers have little interest in reclaiming gang youth, despite claims to the contrary.

Researchers who have spent their careers following the lives of gang youth argue strongly for both the elimination of policies that target gang members and the adoption of prevention approaches that have been proven effective with delinquent youth. Decker and Van Winkle conclude that public safety initiatives should “respond to the crimes of gang members, especially their violence, not to the group nature of the affiliations these individuals maintain” (1996). Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor (2001) echo the call for a focus on behavior rather than gang membership:

Given the permeability of gang membership, policies linking legal action to an individual’s perceived status may erroneously criminal-

ize that individual. As such, we suggest that legislation targeting gang status should be discouraged in favor of legislation focused on actual behavior.

Thornberry points out that there is a strong body of evidence on “what works” to keep youth on track, and that these approaches should be the focus of policy and research efforts:

In contrast to the gang prevention literature,

in the general literature on preventing delinquency and serious delinquency, there are model programs that have been shown to reduce delinquency and violence. Rather than deal directly with the gangs, use gang membership as a marker to get kids into high-impact treatment programs. Second, figure out which of those programs can be tailored and focused to problems of gang members. (Personal communication)