

ARE RURAL GANG MEMBERS SIMILAR TO THEIR URBAN PEERS? *Implications for Rural Communities*

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This study investigated factors associated with gang involvement among rural and urban adolescents. The data were derived from a large self-report survey (N = 2,183) of 7th through 12th grade Nevada students. Surprisingly, there was no significant difference in gang membership or pressure to join gangs between the rural and urban samples. There were differences, however, on other gang and violence indicators between the rural and urban settings. Overall, urban students were significantly more likely to report they had friends in gangs and were threatened by gangs, and had significantly heightened concerns for personal safety, gangs, and violence in their schools and communities. Several rural/urban gender-related differences also were found. Implications for rural communities, prevention and intervention programming, and future research are discussed.

Over the past 20 years, numerous studies have documented a general increase in juvenile gang membership and gang-related activity (Maxson & Klein, 1990; Spergel & Curry, 1993). In addition, academic authors, as well as the media, have commented that this growth is no longer a strictly urban issue, because gang activity has been noted in suburban and even rural settings (Goldstein & Soriano, 1994; Hethorn, 1994; Martin, 1997; Ralph, Colopy, McRae, & Daniel, 1995; Spergel & Curry, 1993; Trump, 1993). Public concern related to gang expansion also has grown, because investigators have consistently shown that gang members are involved in higher rates of nearly all types of crime and drug use compared to the general adolescent



population (Elliot, Huizinga & Ageton, 1985; Fagan, 1989, 1990). Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that the rural America of the 1990s has not escaped the historically urban and suburban problems often associated with gangs: adolescent violence and drug use (Bachus, 1994; Kingery, Mirzaee, Pruitt, Hurley, & Heuberger, 1991).

Gang culture in the form of language, music, body markings, and clothing also has become more mainstream throughout the country, making it increasingly difficult to identify actual gang members from those students who may superficially identify with gang culture and fashion (Hethorn, 1994). With these developments, rural educators have become interested in how to determine the extent of serious gang activity in their schools and what preventative measures can be taken to address gang expansion (Cantrell & Cantrell, 1993). Little is known, however, of the prevalence of rural gang members or how they may differ from their urban peers. No empirical studies known to the authors have included urban and rural samples in their analyses to investigate this growing concern among rural schools and communities. Information regarding the growth of gangs in rural settings and how rural gang members may differ from their urban counterparts is thus clearly needed by rural communities to respond to this growing problem.

In the past, many gang researchers and law enforcement officials believed that the spread of gangs to new geographical areas was the direct result of migration by active members from urban gang centers. More recently, however, a consensus appears to be developing that gang migration does not constitute the major factor in the spread of American gang activity over the past decade. Perhaps in conjunction with the popularization of gang culture, several recent studies have revealed that the spread of new gang activity is principally indigenous in nature, with up to 90 small cities (populations of 10,000 or less) now possessing active gangs (Klein, Maxson, & Miller, 1995; Maxson, 1993).

Historically, research on gangs and gang formation has been based on urban samples and settings (Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 1992; Klein et al., 1995). Because of this, it is not clear the extent to which the findings from such studies can shed light on the activities of gang members in rural settings. In addition, gang research has traditionally focused on the experiences and activities of male gang members. Until

recently, females were thought to comprise a relatively small proportion of the overall gang population and to play insignificant roles in the daily operations of gangs. Recent research (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Bowker & Klien, 1983; Campbell, 1991; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1990; Rhodes & Fischer, 1993), however, has shown tremendous growth in terms of the prevalence of female gang involvement and female gang-related delinquency. Unfortunately, very few investigators have included females and males in their gang-involved samples. To our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to compare rural and urban gang members and to include females in the analyses.

The present study was designed to investigate factors associated with gang involvement among rural and urban youth. We have used an ecological model to investigate the individual, family, and community factors related to rural versus urban gang status. Several authors have endorsed an ecological perspective in clarifying the etiology of youth violence and gang membership (Elliot, 1994; Evans & Mason, 1996; Tolan & Guerra, 1994), and a variety of individual, family, and community variables have been shown to play an important role in juvenile and gang-related delinquency. These have included individual level variables such as low school involvement, ethnic, and gender issues (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Evans & Mason, 1996; Hawkins & Lishner, 1987; Kandel, Raveis, & Davies, 1991); family level variables such as high levels of family change and parental discord, and low levels of family cohesion and supervision (Elliot et al., 1985; Henggler, 1989; Vigil, 1988); and community level variables such as schools, neighborhoods, and communities that have high rates of crime and violence and that are socially disorganized or in transition (ethnic, economic, etc.) (Klien et al., 1995; Spergel & Curry, 1993).

Due to the often long-term influence of gang affiliation (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988) and the higher rates of criminal activity found among gang involved youth, a better understanding of gang affiliated rural students is needed by educators, prevention specialists, and law enforcement officials. Specifically, such information is needed to provide direction to rural prevention and suppression efforts, because much of the existing information on this topic has focused on urban samples.

METHOD

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

The data for this investigation were derived from a large self-report survey initiated to assess adolescent needs and concerns for community-based program planning. A panel of educators and psychologists, as well as focus groups of teen and adult community members, were used to modify and validate the survey. The sample consists of 7th through 12th grade Nevada students, with urban students from schools in Reno ($n = 1,421$) and rural students from schools located in isolated, rural counties ($n = 762$). Administration of the survey was conducted during the 1995-1996 school year. Students recorded their answers on forms that were scanned using a SCANTRON machine.

Administration of the survey was conducted in school during regularly scheduled classroom periods. Students were instructed that no questionnaires were to include names and that participation was completely voluntary. In addition, all youth responded to the same survey instrument.

Although Nevada's urban gang problems are currently less severe than some other major urban centers, its tremendous growth and proximity to California (the state with the greatest number of active gang members) provide an excellent opportunity to better understand the development and growth of youth gangs. The sample characteristics (including youth from rural and urban settings) of this study thus provide data that are uniquely useful to address gaps in the literature pertaining to the spread of gang activity.

MEASURES

This study is based on youth responses to the demographic and psychosocial items contained on the survey questionnaire.

Gang involvement. Students self-selected gang status by endorsing an item that asked if they were an active member of a gang and, if yes, how long they had been a member. In addition, students were asked if they had any friends in a gang, if they had ever been pressured to join a gang, and if gang members had ever threatened them.

Physical fighting. Students were asked how many times they were in a physical fight during the past 30 days. Answers ranged from 1 (0 times) to 7 (10 or more times).

Carrying weapons. Students were asked how many times they had carried a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club (other than for legal hunting reasons) during the past 30 days. Answers ranged from 1 (0 days) to 5 (6 or more days).

Emotional adjustment. This scale was composed of seven items measuring the degree to which various emotional problems or complaints bothered respondents during the past 30 days. These items were the following: feeling blue, feeling others are to blame for most of your problems, thoughts of ending your life, urges to injure or harm someone, difficulty making decisions, nervousness or shakiness inside, and the ability to handle your own emotions. Answers ranged on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Cronbach's alpha, a test of the internal consistency of these items, was .87.

Life satisfaction. This scale was a combination of eight items measuring various indices affecting happiness or satisfaction with life. These were the following: not feeling liked or respected by others, overall satisfaction with school, overall health, general enjoyment of life, relationship with your family, your future, relationship with your friends, and ability to be close to someone you care for. Youth were asked to reflect how they felt about each question during the past 6 months, and to choose answers from a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*). Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Family communication. The scale was composed of five items measuring how well the statements describe the student's family. These items were the following: family members discuss their feelings and concerns with each other, family members try to understand each other's feelings, we can calmly discuss problems with each other, a lot of arguing occurs between family members, and my family is able to resolve conflicts. Responses ranged from 1 (*does not describe my family at all*) to 5 (*very well describes my family*). Cronbach's alpha was .79.

Family concerns. This scale was composed of six items reflecting the students' level of concern regarding their families. The items were the following: getting along with parents/stepparents, parents understanding and supporting me, living up to parents' expectations, family using drugs and alcohol, family having problems paying bills, and abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional). Answers ranged on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not concerned*) to 5 (*very concerned*). Cronbach's alpha was .77.

Peer concerns. This scale was composed of five items reflecting the students' level of concern regarding their peers: friends using drugs/alcohol, peer pressure to use drugs/alcohol, getting along with your classmates, peer pressure for sexual activity, and harassment from peers (bullying, teasing, etc.). Answers ranged on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not concerned*) to 5 (*very concerned*). Cronbach's alpha was .74.

School concerns. This scale was composed of six items reflecting the students' level of concern regarding their school. The items were the following: personal safety at school, quality of education I'm getting, doing well in school, getting along with teachers, gangs in your school, and violence in your school. Answers ranged on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not concerned*) to 5 (*very concerned*). Cronbach's alpha was .84.

Neighborhood concern. The scale was composed of a list of eight activities designed to assess students' perception of the level of support and risk afforded by their neighborhood. These items were the following: you talk with your neighbors, you see people drinking alcohol on the street, someone gets robbed, people help each other, you see a fight, you see the police arrest someone, kids play sports together, and gang members get in fights. Responses ranged from 1 (*all the time*) to 4 (*never*). Cronbach's alpha was .71.

Socioeconomic status. This was a composite variable composed of three items, two of which asked for the highest amount of education each parent had completed whereas the third asked what their income was in comparison to the income of most people. Answers ranged from 1 (*among the highest*) to 5 (*among the lowest*).

TABLE 1
Comparison of Adolescents in Rural and Urban Schools

<i>Gang Related Risk</i>	<i>Rural (%)</i>	<i>Urban (%)</i>	χ^2	<i>df</i>
Gang membership	22.2	19.5	2.04	1
Friends in gangs	42.8	48.6	7.54 *	2
Pressure to join gangs	17.9	17.2	0.12	1
Threatened by gangs	19.4	28.8	22.31 **	2
Carrying weapons	29.4	28.0	16.28	12
Physical fighting	32.9	32.8	10.40	14

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

RESULTS

Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and chi-square test of independence procedures were used to examine differences between rural and urban students and gang members. In addition, two-way ANOVA procedures were performed to compare rural and urban gang members by gender on selected variables by ecological level.

Descriptive results. Surprisingly, a slightly higher percentage of the rural students (22.2%; $n = 169$) indicated that they were active gang members (versus 19.5% of the urban sample; $n = 277$). Among females, 8.3% of the rural sample and 7.5% of the urban sample reported gang membership. These percentages were higher among the males, with 13.3% of the rural sample and 11.5% of the urban sample reporting active gang affiliation.

Comparison of rural and urban students. As can be seen in Table 1, there was no significant difference between rural and urban students in gang membership, pressure to join a gang, carrying a weapon, and physical fighting. Significantly more urban students, however, reported having friends in a gang ($\chi^2 = 7.54$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$) and being threatened by gangs ($\chi^2 = 22.31$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). In addition, Table 2 reveals that urban students reported significantly more concern regarding their personal safety at school ($F = 11.47$, $p = .01$), their safety in their community ($F = 14.20$, $p = .01$), gangs in their school ($F = 75.85$, $p = .01$), gangs in their community ($F = 97.39$, $p = .01$), and violence in their school ($F = 47.99$, $p = .01$). There was no significant difference between rural and urban students concerning peer harassment.

TABLE 2
Comparison of Rural and
Urban Students on Gang and Violence Issues

<i>Concerns Regarding Gang Behavior</i>	<i>Group Means</i>		F	df
	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>		
Personal safety at school	2.69	2.92	11.47 **	1, 2292
Personal safety in community	2.82	3.07	14.20 **	1, 2302
Harassment from peers	2.72	2.74	0.06	1, 2300
Gangs in community	2.58	3.27	97.39 **	1, 2279
Gangs in school	2.56	3.17	75.85 **	1, 2288
Violence in school	2.66	3.14	47.99 **	1, 2226

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3
Group Means and ANOVA Results of Rural and
Urban Gang Member Comparisons by Gender

<i>Ecological-Level Variable</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	F	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	F	<i>Interaction</i>	df
Emotional stability	23.15	24.33	1.39	24.43	23.02	2.06	4.10 *	3, 347
Life satisfaction	28.93	28.59	0.13	29.50	28.34	1.40	0.01	3, 341
School support	15.39	14.24	2.60	15.41	14.65	1.11	0.47	3, 359
School concerns	17.60	16.85	1.11	18.63	16.48	9.06 **	0.25	3, 376
Peer concerns	13.48	14.20	1.61	14.75	13.10	7.83 **	1.55	3, 392
Family concerns	18.97	19.85	1.43	20.60	18.44	9.86 **	0.89	3, 384
Family communication	10.51	10.99	1.22	10.47	10.48	0.76	2.70	3, 397
Neighborhood concern	19.62	20.90	3.89 *	20.46	19.86	0.67	1.43	3, 285

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Rural and urban gang comparisons by gender. Two-way ANOVA rural/urban by gender results are summarized in Table 3. These analyses indicate that there were no rural/urban main effect differences for any of the ecological level variables except neighborhood concern ($F = 3.89$, $p = .05$), in which urban gang members reported significantly less cohesion and more violent acts in their neighborhoods. Gender main effect differences were found for school concerns ($F = 9.06$, $p = .01$), peer concerns ($F = 7.83$, $p = .01$), and family concerns ($F = 9.86$, $p = .01$), indicating female gang members reported significantly higher levels of concern in each of these areas. No main effect

TABLE 4
Significant Results of Urban and
Rural Gang Member by Gender Analyses

	<i>Females</i>				<i>Males</i>			
	<i>Rural</i> (%)	<i>Urban</i> (%)	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>Rural</i> (%)	<i>Urban</i> (%)	<i>df</i>	χ^2
Four or more								
physical fights	26.4	18.5	5	7.01	38.7	26.4	7	14.22 **
Friends in gangs	88.0	63.2	1	8.53 **	84.4	68.0	1	5.95 **
Threatened by gangs	67.7	41.0	1	7.04 **	53.2	57.4	1	0.19
High level of school								
involvement	25.4	10.3	4	13.06 *	23.3	21.5	4	4.96
Ethnic minority	21.0	44.1	1	8.06 *	32.0	48.8	1	6.40 *
Living with both								
biological parents	53.2	42.3	3	6.84	44.4	36.4	3	8.20 *

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

differences were found for emotional stability, life satisfaction, school support, and family communication. Only emotional stability produced a significant interaction, with rural female gang members reporting significantly higher levels of emotional stability than the other gang groups ($F = 4.10, p = .05$).

Among females, chi-square analyses revealed that rural gang members reported significantly more friends in a gang ($\chi^2 = 8.53, df = 1, p < .01$) and higher levels of school involvement ($\chi^2 = 13.06, df = 4, p < .05$) than their urban counterparts (see Table 4). In contrast, female urban gang members reported being threatened by gang members significantly more than rural gang members ($\chi^2 = 7.04, df = 1, p < .01$), and were composed significantly more of minorities ($\chi^2 = 8.06, df = 1, p < .05$). However, no significant differences between rural and urban female gang members were found for carrying weapons, physical fighting, pressure to join a gang, length of time in a gang, grade point average, repeating a grade, cutting classes, educational aspirations, length of time in the community, primary language, or estimated family income (not shown in Table 4).

Among males, rural gang members reported significantly more physical fights ($\chi^2 = 14.22, df = 7, p < .01$) and friends in a gang ($\chi^2 = 5.95, df = 1, p < .01$). As with the females, urban male gang members were significantly more likely to report being a minority ($\chi^2 = 6.40,$

$df = 1, p < .05$). In addition, there was a significant difference in family living arrangement among the males, with rural gang members belonging to more biological and stepparent families, and urban gang members belonging to more single-parent families ($\chi^2 = 8.20, df = 3, p < .05$). No significant differences were found for carrying weapons, pressure to join a gang, threatened by a gang, length of time in a gang, grade point average, repeating a grade, cutting classes, educational aspirations, school involvement, length of time in the community, primary language, or estimated family income (not shown in Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Surprisingly, there was no significant difference in self-reported gang membership or pressure to join gangs between our rural and urban samples. Although this finding needs to be replicated with additional data from studies using multiple data sources (e.g., self-report surveys and police/crime reports), rural educators should be alarmed by the high rates of self-reported gang allegiance. There were differences, however, on other gang and violence indicators between the rural and urban settings. Overall, urban students were significantly more likely to report they had friends in gangs and were threatened by gangs, and had significantly heightened concerns for personal safety, gangs, and violence in their schools and community. This reveals that although rural students are increasingly vulnerable to the spread of violence, drugs, and gang culture, they report that their schools and communities are still safer and less threatening places than those of their urban peers.

When comparing rural and urban gang members, no significant difference was found on any of the individual, peer, or family level variables of this study. Like the rest of the urban students in this study, however, urban gang members did report significantly higher levels of neighborhood concern, indicating less positive interactions and more violent incidents in their neighborhoods than their rural peers. Such findings are partially corroborated by school and law enforcement officials from the urban community that was sampled for this study (Reno, Nevada), who acknowledge an existing, moderate gang problem (Leone & Evans, 1996). In addition, Reno has undergone vigor-

ous growth and transition during the past decade. This growth may have helped fuel gang expansion, because previous studies have found a link between gang development and communities that are in economic and/or ethnic transition (Klien et al., 1995; Spergel & Curry, 1993). Given such a link, the multiple changes and challenges that many rural American communities currently face may place them at elevated risk for the development of gang activity.

Changes in rural environments over the past decade also have included exposure to satellite television and the internet, communication vehicles that have relieved isolation for many rural youth while accelerating the influence of urban culture. As previously mentioned, it has become increasingly difficult, even on rural school campuses, to identify actual gang members from students who are attracted superficially to gang culture and fashion. However, as gang culture has become more normative among youth in urban and rural settings, the risk of hard core gang development in rural environments also has increased. In addition, the current finding of no significant rural/urban difference in how long gang members have lived in their communities helps to discount the idea that transplanted urban gang members are the primary cause of the recent rise in rural gang activity. This supports previous studies that have found the spread of gangs to be largely a "home grown" phenomenon (Maxson, 1993).

Although urban students in general reported having more friends in a gang, rural gang members reported knowing significantly more gang-involved students than their urban gang counterparts. Perhaps this is a result of the smaller social environments of rural settings, where gang-involved rural youth are more likely to know one another. In addition, and in spite of present results, few would dispute that serious gang activity is more of a problem in urban areas. The enhanced visibility of urban gang violence, as well as greater overall numbers of urban gangs and their members, may have contributed to urban students reporting more gang involved friends than their rural peers.

Interestingly, among the two-way ANOVA analyses, a significant interaction revealed that rural female gang members reported higher levels of emotional stability than the other gang affiliated rural/urban by gender groups. In addition, rural female gang members reported significantly higher levels of school involvement than their urban counterparts. Taken together, these results reveal two protective fac-

tors that may help insulate rural gang-affiliated females from the potential long-term negative effects normally associated with gang membership. Among the results from the direct comparisons between female and male gang members, females reported significantly more school, peer, and family related concerns. These feelings of personal concern and distress may provide direction for counselors and gang intervention specialists hoping to enhance the support of gang affiliated females who wish to untangle themselves from their gang lifestyles.

Contrary to our expectations, no significant differences were found for many of the rural and urban gang member main effect analyses. Such null findings reveal more similarity than expected between urban and rural gang-affiliated youth. Several differences were found, however, when rural and urban gang members were compared by gender. As expected, among the females urban gang members reported being threatened by other gang members and were composed of minorities significantly more than their rural counterparts. Rural female gang members, however, reported significantly more friends that were in a gang. Again, this could be due to the smaller social environments of rural settings, where gang-involved rural youth are more likely to know one another. As with the females, the rural male gang members reported significantly more friends in a gang and were less likely to be composed of minorities. They also reported significantly more physical fighting and were more likely to live with both of their biological parents compared to their urban counterparts.

In summary, the finding of no significant difference in self-reported rural and urban gang membership is our most striking result. In addition, because the data were derived from students in school, it is likely that present results underestimate community-wide gang affiliation because previous studies have linked gang membership with low school involvement and dropout status (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Evans & Mason, 1996). As previously stated, future research on this topic should incorporate data from multiple sources to create a more accurate picture of the spread of gang activity in rural communities.

Notwithstanding the percentages of self-reported rural gang affiliation found in this study, rural students still have less gang-related concerns and believe their communities to be safer and less threatening places to live than their urban peers. There thus appears to be a strong

opportunity for rural communities to focus on positive youth development and the creation of alternatives to gang affiliation before hardcore gang activity takes hold. This may be particularly important, given the current lack of success plaguing most gang intervention projects (Cohen, Williams, Bekelman, & Crosse, 1995). A prevention focus for rural communities could initially include the development of a multisource, community-wide assessment to understand the current scope of gang activity and resources available to address this issue. To accomplish this, communities could establish a broad-based community coalition or task force, which can then use such information to set priorities and develop community or school-based prevention programs.

Bogenschneider (1996) has proposed an ecological risk/protective theory for building prevention programs that we believe can help rural communities searching for strategies to address burgeoning gang issues. She has articulated several principles for developing prevention programs from this theoretical perspective that include identifying the real issues facing local youth; establishing well-defined goals that target risk and protective processes; collaborating with local stakeholders; tailoring program plans to reduce risks locally and build protective processes that do not exist; involving target audiences in program design and implementation; developing programs that are sensitive to cultural, ethnic, and other forms of local diversity; creating interventions that are early, continuous, and developmentally appropriate; and evaluating program effectiveness by monitoring risk and protective processes. These principles, in conjunction with the current societal goals of creating safe schools and enhancing the quality of education afforded to at-risk youth, may be successful program development strategies for rural communities hoping to address gang related issues before they escalate into serious problems (Dryfoos, 1990).

Among the potential limitations of this study is the reliance on self-report, although self-report data regarding illegal activities among adolescents have been studied by numerous investigators and been accepted as valid (Hardt & Peterson-Hardt, 1977; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981). Of particular concern may be the self-definition of gang status. This remains a difficult issue for gang researchers, and many have relied on self-definition as the best indicator of gang status due to the continuing debate as to what constitutes a gang and membership to

one (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Fagan, 1990; Harris, 1988). Cromwell, Taylor, and Palacios (1992) developed three criteria by which to establish gang status: self-recognition by the group as a distinct entity, enough illegal activity to attract the negative attention of law enforcement officials, and community recognition of the group as a distinct entity. These criteria may help rural schools and communities initially establish the existence and scope of a serious gang problem, which can then be addressed through the community-based program development principles advocated earlier in this article. Although present results indicate that rural students are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the spread of gang culture, we still know little of how gang tolerant or favorable attitudes among youth lead to developmentally hard-core gang membership or gang infested, violent communities. Certainly, these findings from isolated, rural communities in Nevada should alert rural educators and youth specialists that they are no longer immune to the pressures of urban life.

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