Differences Between Gang Girls and Gang Boys: Results From a Multisite Survey

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During the past decade, a growing body of literature examining gang girls and the involvement of girls in violence has appeared. In this article, we contribute to this developing literature by using data from a multisite evaluation to explore the extent to which gang girls are similar to or different from gang boys in terms of their attitudes, perceptions of their gangs, and their involvement in ganglike illegal activities. Findings indicate that gang girls are involved in a full array of illegal gang activities, although not as frequently as the gang boys. Whereas similarities exist in behavioral activities and in reasons for joining gangs, gang girls report greater social isolation from family and friends than do gang boys. The gang girls also report lower levels of self-esteem than do the boys. These gender differences are discussed in terms of differential developmental trajectories for boys and girls.

The past 100 years have produced volumes of research describing gangs, gang members, and gang activity. Although the U.S. violent crime rate has declined during each of the past 5 years, some crimi-
nologists are concerned by the fact that the juvenile violent crime rate has not mirrored this general trend (Fox, 1996; Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997). Increased access to firearms (Sheley & Wright, 1995) and the resurgence of youth gangs in American society have been hailed as explanations for the increase in juvenile violence (Spergel, 1995).

Until recently, the role of girls in youth violence largely was ignored. Violence and gang membership were viewed primarily as male-dominated phenomena. During the past decade, however, a growing body of literature examining gang girls and the involvement of girls in violence has appeared (e.g., Campbell, 1991; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Curry, 1998; Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999b; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Fleisher, 1998; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Miller, 1998a, 1998b; Moore, 1991). In this article, we contribute to this developing literature by using data from a multisite evaluation to explore the extent to which gang girls are similar to or different from gang boys in terms of their attitudes, perceptions of their gangs, and their involvement in ganglike illegal activities. Specifically, we address the following four questions:

1. What is the prevalence of girls in gangs in a general sample of adolescents?
2. How similar to gang boys are gang girls in terms of their illegal activity?
3. Are there organizational or structural differences in the gangs described by gang boys and gang girls?
4. Do gang girls report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of social isolation than do gang boys?

GENDER AND GANG MEMBERSHIP

Historically, girl gang members either have been overlooked or stereotyped as “tomboys” or “sex objects.” During the past decade, a
growing number of researchers have concentrated their efforts on understanding the nature and extent of female delinquency and gang membership (e.g., Bjerregard & Smith, 1993; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Chesney-Lind, Shelden, & Joe, 1996; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Triplett & Meyers, 1995). Estimates concerning the prevalence of females in gangs, however, vary greatly, as do descriptions of their involvement in gang activities (e.g., Cohen, Williams, Bekelman, & Crosse, 1995; Curry, Ball, & Fox, 1994; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Goldstein & Glick, 1994; Huff, 1997; Klein & Crawford, 1995). Most estimates place the figure in the single digits (e.g., Curry et al., 1994; Goldstein & Glick, 1994; Huff, 1997) and thus perpetuate the stereotype of girls being auxiliary members and relegated to gender-specific crimes (i.e., seducing males, concealing weapons, and instigating fights between rival male gangs). For example, a study of 61 large and small police departments yielded a total of 9,092 female gang members, representing less than 4% of the total (Curry et al., 1994). Similarly, Goldstein and Glick (1994) state that “males continue to outnumber female gang members at a ratio of approximately 20 to 1” (p. 9).

Contrary to these single-digit estimates of girls in gangs, results of recent self-report surveys place the figure well above 20%. Bjerregard and Smith (1993) indicate that 22% of girls in their high-risk sample (i.e., socially disorganized neighborhoods) were gang members. These 60 girls accounted for 31% of the self-reported gang members in that survey. Cohen and her colleagues (1995) interviewed approximately 520 youth (10 to 18 years of age) as part of their evaluation of 13 drug- and gang-prevention projects and found that girls accounted for approximately 21% of self-proclaimed gang members. Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) report girls comprising 20% to 46% of the gang members during 4 years of interviews with high-risk youth included in the Denver Youth Survey. When this longitudinal sample was aged 11 to 15 years, 46% of the gang members were female. By the time the sample had reached the age range of 13 to 19 years, girls accounted for only 20% of the gang members. These findings provide some evidence for the belief that girls age-in and age-out of gangs earlier than do boys. As suggested by some authors, different developmental trajectories may well be operative for these boys and girls (e.g., Brown &

Two methodological issues contribute to the emergence of these two rather disparate estimates of the prevalence of girls in gangs: (a) the research methodology used to produce the data and (b) the age of the sample members studied. The case study method has been the primary tool used by researchers to study gangs (e.g., Asbury, 1927; Campbell, 1991; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1988, 1994; Moore, 1978; Puffer, 1912; Spergel, 1966; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988). This observational approach provides a wealth of information about specific gangs and their members. Its goal has been description, not generalization, and thus these researchers have not attempted to discuss the prevalence of males and females in gangs.

More recently, social scientists have turned to two types of quantitative data. One approach uses law enforcement records to describe gang offenses and gang members (e.g., Curry, Ball, & Decker, 1996; Curry et al., 1994; Maxson & Klein, 1990; Spergel, 1990). This body of research reinforces the stereotypical picture of gang members being disproportionately male and from ethnic or racial minorities, an image often echoed by the popular press. Given enforcement strategies that tend to target individuals with these characteristics, in conjunction with a tendency to discredit the notion that girls possibly can be gang members, this finding is not surprising. An example of differential enforcement practices affecting perceptions of gangs is found in the Los Angeles Sheriff Department’s operating manual, which states that youths are classified as gang members when they admit to gang membership. The same manual, however, questions the validity of female self-nomination and encourages officers to disregard females’ claims to gang membership. “These same females will say they are members of the local Crip gang; however, evidence has shown that this is not so” (Operation Safe Streets, 1995, p. 40).

A second quantitative approach employs survey methods to study gang behavior (e.g., Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993; Fagan, 1989; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Winfree, Backstrom, & Mays, 1994). These surveys tend to include larger, more general samples of youth, allowing comparisons to be made between gang and nongang youth. With larger samples, the researchers also have been able to examine gang
characteristics among a variety of gangs. In summary, case studies provide a depth of information but little breadth in coverage, that is, information about a limited number of gangs or their members. Surveys, on the other hand, provide a breadth of information about a larger number of gangs and their members but little depth. It becomes crucial for results from these divergent methods to be compared and contrasted.

A second methodological issue involves sampling design. Despite recent exceptions (e.g., Fleisher, 1998; Miller, 1998a), field research historically has tended to be conducted by male researchers on male individuals, thereby failing to identify and describe female participants, other than through the eyes of male gang members (Campbell, 1991). This shortcoming has posed problems not only in terms of identifying gang girls but also in describing the role of girls in gangs. Older adolescents and young adults frequently serve as objects of field studies. Hagedorn (1988), for example, studied the “top dogs” in the formation of Milwaukee gangs. Campbell (1991) reports on case studies of three gang girls, one of whom did not join the gang until her late 20s. Vigil’s (1988) gang boys were 16 to 23 years of age. These older samples fail to identify gang girls captured in general surveys of younger samples. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) include a much wider age range of gang members in their St. Louis study (from 13 to 29 years, with a mean of 16.9 years). Their snowball approach, however, produced only seven female gang members, compared with 92 males. And these gang girls “were often recruited in groups of two or through their boyfriends” (p. 57). Field studies, through a combination of relying on older respondents and reliance on snowball sampling techniques, we suspect, have systematically excluded younger girls from field studies. ²

Surveys of gang members generally have concentrated on high-school-aged samples, considerably younger than field studies. The Rochester Youth Survey (Bjergaard & Smith, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993) and the Denver Youth Survey (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993) included adolescents in their early and middle teens. This discrepancy in age of the samples may be a more salient factor than is the data collection method in accounting for the very disparate findings reported by field studies and general surveys. There is reason to believe that girls age-in and age-out of gangs at ear-
lier ages than do boys. Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), for instance, reported a lower percentage of girl gang members as the sample aged. Additional evidence suggesting that girls mature out of gangs at an earlier age than do males is found in the works of Fishman (1995), Harris (1994), Moore and Hagedorn (1996), and Swart (1995). According to Harris (1994), girls are most active in gangs between 13 and 16 years of age. She suggests that “by 17 or 18, interests and activities of individual members are directed toward the larger community rather than toward the gang, and girls begin to leave the active gang milieu” (p. 300). Thus, gang samples consisting of older adolescents or gang members in their 20s are apt to produce a substantially different picture than studies focusing on middle and high-school-aged youth.

Adding to the confusion is the absence of a common definition of what constitutes a gang or being a gang member. Field researchers generally rely on self-identification corroborated through hours, days, and even years of observation. Law enforcement and survey researchers rely on a range of factors that may well shape the nature of the gang problem. Maxson and Klein’s (1990) study highlights the importance of definition (i.e., applying the Chicago Police Department definition of gang affiliation to Los Angeles resulted in a 50% reduction in classifications of gang-related homicides). Some survey researchers have relied on responses to a single item (Bjerregard & Smith, 1993); others have invoked additional criteria, including the requisite that the gang be involved in delinquent activity (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993) and have some organizational characteristics (Winfree, Backstrom et al., 1994; Winfree, Mays, & Vigil-Backstrom, 1994). Clearly, such disparate criteria may well affect study results. With these methodological and definitional issues in mind, we now turn to a review of recent research examining the role of girls in gangs.

**GANG MEMBERSHIP AND FEMALE DELINQUENCY**

Are girls as delinquent as boys, especially within the gang context? The prevailing impression is that girls account for very little of the violent crime in society, and this also applies to gang crime. Law enforcement data continue to report female delinquency as considerably less prevalent and less violent than male delinquency. In 1995, for exam-
ple, girls under 18 years of age accounted for only 14.6% of juvenile arrests for violent crimes and 26% of juvenile property crime arrests (Department of Justice, 1996, p. 217).

Recent results from the Denver Youth Survey reveal that, from a policy perspective, even though they account for only a small percentage of all active offenders, girl gang members account for more violent crimes than do nongang boys (Huizinga, 1997). The stereotype of the girl as primarily a sex object, with limited participation in the delinquent activity of the gang, apparently requires reexamination. Rosenbaum’s (1991) study of 70 female gang members who were wards of the California Youth Authority is instructive in this regard. Not one of the females mentioned sex as playing a role in her gang involvement. Huff (1997), however, reported that several of the girls in his study indicated that they were forced to engage in sexual activity with male gang members. Adding clarity to these opposing positions, Miller (1998a) indicates that it is the girl’s status within the gang that determines if she will be sexually victimized by gang boys. Thus, it may be that this stereotype of gang girls as sex objects is more an artifact of the data collection technique and of the age of the youth sampled than it is of the actual distribution of the behavior in the targeted population. Furthermore, it may be that the traditional focus on girls and their sexual activity has distracted attention from their “other” delinquent activity.

Recent anecdotal observations in the mass media have suggested that females have become more violent and crime oriented in the recent past. Evidence to support such increases, however, is largely missing (see the critique of the media construction of girl gangs by Chesney-Lind et al., 1996). In an attempt to address this issue of a “new violent female offender,” Huizinga and Esbensen (1991) compared self-report data from the 1978 National Youth Survey with 1989 data from the Denver Youth Survey. They did not find any evidence of an increase in female violent offending. Moreover, in his comprehensive review of the literature, Spergel (1995) concludes that “there is no clear evidence that female gang members are increasingly involved in serious gang violence” (p. 58). Likewise, Chesney-Lind and colleagues (1996) note that the “rise in girls’ arrests more or less parallels increases in arrests of male youth” (p. 189).
GANG MEMBERS: REASONS FOR JOINING THE GANG

Who joins gangs, and are gang members different from other similarly situated adolescents? And, are girls who join gangs different from boys who join? These questions are of significant theoretical and practical interest and numerous other researchers have addressed one or more of these questions (e.g., Bjerrregard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Giordano, 1978; Harris, 1988; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Winfree, Backstrom et al., 1994; Winfree, Mays et al., 1994). In a recent publication, we compared demographic and behavioral characteristics of gang and nongang youth (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). In this article we turn our attention to why adolescents join gangs.

Prior research has indicated that youth join gangs for a multitude of reasons, ranging from protection against victimization to obtaining emotional fulfillment (i.e., a sense of belonging). Do boys and girls differ in the affective need that is met by group membership? The findings reported by, among others, Campbell (1991), Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe (1996), Fleisher (1998), and Harris (1988), indicate that girls join gangs because they are seeking a “familial” peer group. In his account of the Fremont Hustlers, a Kansas City gang, Fleisher (1998) provides vivid descriptions of the lives of gang girls and boys. His 21 months of observations confirmed that the girls tended to seek emotionally fulfilling relationships within the gang, whereas the boys were more drawn to the “action” associated with gang affiliation. To what extent, however, are the differences in gang girls and gang boys an artifact of the gang, rather than a more general gender difference? Fleisher (1998) addresses this issue in an endnote:

If we don’t understand the full range of cross-cultural adolescent female behavior, how are we to pinpoint those behaviors which are unique deviant responses to a range of family and environmental stimuli? In short, we don’t understand how much of what we are measuring in female (and male) delinquent and gang behavior is within the range of predictable adolescent behavior in complex urban settings. (p. 257)

Developmental theorists have documented gender differences in children’s play (Thorne, 1993), in the organization of peer groups (Thorne & Luria, 1986), and in development of sexual identities (Lees, 1993). Given these differences between boys and girls in gen-
eral, should we not expect to find differences between gang girls and gang boys?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From this brief review, we can conclude that disagreement permeates the gang literature. There is a lack of consensus concerning not only the extent of female gang participation, but also the nature of that participation and the reasons for why youth join gangs. We organized our analyses around the following four questions:

1. What is the prevalence of girls in gangs in a general sample of adolescents?
2. How similar to gang boys are gang girls in terms of their illegal activity?
3. Are there organizational or structural differences in the gangs described by gang boys and gang girls?
4. Do gang girls report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of social isolation than do gang boys?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This investigation of gang girls and gang boys is part of a larger study, the National Evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. Site selection and sampling procedures were dictated by that evaluation’s design. Because the G.R.E.A.T. program is a seventh-grade curriculum, eighth-grade students were surveyed to allow for a 1-year follow-up and at the same time guarantee that none of the sample was currently enrolled in the program. This multisite, multistate cross-sectional survey was completed during the spring of 1995. Site selection was limited to cities in which the G.R.E.A.T. program had been delivered in school year 1993-1994 (when the targeted students were seventh graders).  

SITE SELECTION

Records provided by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the federal agency with oversight of the G.R.E.A.T. program, were used to identify prospective sites meeting two criteria. First, only
those agencies with two or more officers trained prior to January 1994
to teach G.R.E.A.T. were considered eligible. Second, to enhance the
geographic and demographic diversity of the sample, some potential
cities were excluded from consideration. The 11 sites selected for this
phase of the evaluation (Las Cruces, NM; Omaha, NE; Phoenix, AZ;
Philadelphia, PA; Kansas City, MO; Milwaukee, WI; Orlando, FL;
Will County, IL; Providence, RI; Pocatello, ID; and Torrance, CA)
provide a diverse sample.

Within the selected sites, schools that offered G.R.E.A.T. during
the previous 2 years were selected and questionnaires were adminis-
tered in group settings to all eighth graders in attendance on the speci-
fied day. Attendance rates varied from a low of 75% at one Kansas
City middle school to a high of 93% at several schools in Will County
and Pocatello. This resulted in a final sample of 5,935 eighth-grade
students representing 315 classrooms in 42 different schools.

This public-school-based sample has the standard limitations asso-
ciated with school-based surveys (i.e., exclusion of private school stu-
dents, exclusion of truants, sick, and/or tardy students, and the poten-
tial underrepresentation of high-risk youth). With this caveat in mind,
the current sample is composed of all eighth-grade students in attend-
ance on the days questionnaires were administered in these 11 juris-
dictions. The sample includes primarily 13- to 15-year-old students
attending public schools in a cross-section of communities within the
continental United States. This is not a random sample and generaliza-
tions cannot be made to the adolescent population as a whole. How-
ever, students from these 11 jurisdictions do represent the following
types of communities: large urban areas with a majority of students
belonging to a racial or ethnic minority (Philadelphia, Phoenix, Mil-
waukee, and Kansas City); medium-sized cities (population ranges
between 100,000 and 500,000) with considerable racial and/or ethnic
heterogeneity (Providence and Orlando) and medium-sized cities
with a majority of White students but a substantial minority enroll-
ment (Omaha and Torrance); a small city (less than 100,000 inhabi-
tants) with an ethnically diverse student population (Las Cruces) and a
small racially homogeneous (i.e., White) city (Pocatello); and a rural
community in which more than 80% of the student population is
White (Will County). This diversity in locations and in sample charac-
teristics allows for exploration of the distribution of gang affiliation
and delinquent activity in an age group generally excluded from “gang research.”

MEASURES

The student questionnaire consisted of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral measures. We report first on the demographic composition of the sample (gender, age, race or ethnicity, and family composition) and then focus on attitudes and behaviors associated with gang membership. Even though there is a lack of consensus about what constitutes gang membership, and numerous definitional issues arise, we chose to use a self-nomination procedure. This self-definition method has become the standard not only in survey research but is widely accepted in law enforcement practice. In the current research, two filter questions introduce the gang-specific section of the questionnaire: “Have you ever been a gang member?” and “Are you now in a gang?” Given the current sample, with almost all the respondents under the age of 15, even affirmative responses to the first question followed by a negative response to the second may still indicate a recent gang affiliation. In an attempt to limit our sample of gang members to “delinquent gangs,” we employed a restrictive definition of gang status. Thus, only those youth who reported ever having been in a gang and who reported that their gangs engaged in at least one type of delinquent behavior (fighting other gangs, stealing cars, stealing in general, or robbing people) were classified as gang members.

This large sample provides us the opportunity to examine the extent to which gang girls are similar to gang boys. Inasmuch as gang membership remains a relatively rare phenomenon, most general surveys do not contain adequate numbers of gang members to make such comparisons. Thus, our emphasis here is to provide a descriptive account of gang girls and gang boys drawn from a general survey of middle school students. With respect to behavioral comparisons, we examine two separate measures of self-reported delinquency and victimization: “ever” prevalence (i.e., have you ever . . . ) and “annual” frequency (i.e., how many times in the past 12 months have you . . . ). We then turn our attention to an examination of attitudes about gangs and whether gender differences exist.
The self-identified gang members were asked to describe their gang in terms of structural and organizational components, membership, and behavioral characteristics. In addition, respondents indicated how they felt being gang members, why they joined, and where they fit into the gang. To explore the extent to which gang members are socially isolated or suffer from low self-esteem, we examine responses to a six-item self-esteem scale and responses to three questions tapping social isolation.8

RESULTS

The focus of this investigation is on differences between gang girls and gang boys. To put the results in perspective, we first provide a description of the demographic composition of the entire sample. Approximately half of the sample is female (52%) and most of the respondents live in intact homes (62%), that is, they indicated that a mother and father (including stepparents) were present in the home. The sample is ethnically diverse, with a sizable number of White (40%), African American (27%), and Hispanic (19%) respondents. As would be expected with an eighth-grade sample, most of the respondents were between 13 and 15 years of age, with 60% being 14 years old. Comparisons of gender differences within the total sample revealed some slight differences: the girls are somewhat younger than the boys and are less likely to live in intact homes.

Table 1 reveals, among other things, that there are considerably more girls in gangs than is commonly assumed or than official reports suggest. Of the 623 gang members, representing 10.6% of the sample, 237 are female and 380 are male. Six of the gang members failed to provide information about their sex. Consistent with much of the emerging gang research, but contrary to prevailing stereotypes that gangs are predominantly male, these 237 girls represent 38% of the gang members in this eighth-grade sample. Even though this figure still indicates that females are proportionately underrepresented among gang members, it is to a far lesser extent than is commonly assumed when older samples are studied.

Contrary to popular perception, results from this survey indicate a greater level of gang participation by White youth than most recent re-
search has suggested: 25% of the gang members are White. Although White youth in this sample are less likely to be involved in gangs than are African American and Hispanic youth, it is not to the extent that prior research has suggested.

Consistent with earlier assessments of the demographic characteristics of gangs, this sample reveals that younger youth are underrepresented in gangs and gang members are more likely to live with a single parent. Within this limited age sample, the youth who were 13 years

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics (in percentages) of Gang Youth by Gender

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<th>Total Sample</th>
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<th>Gang Youth Only</th>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total n</td>
<td>2,808</td>
<td>3,043</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>237</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total percentage</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
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<td>Race</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>49²</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>65</td>
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<td>42</td>
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<td>Family Structure**</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Age**</td>
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<td>42</td>
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<td>63</td>
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1. Column percent.
2. Row percent.
** p < .01 for total sample and for gang youth.
and younger account for only 17% of gang members whereas they represent 29% of the total sample. At the other extreme, 23% of gang members are 15 years old or older whereas only 10% of the total sample is this old. Furthermore, among the gang members, 27% of the males are 15 years old compared to 16% of the females. Although the girls in the entire sample are younger than the boys, this age difference among gang members is more pronounced than in the total sample. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that females age-out of gangs at younger ages than do males.

Ethnographic researchers have described family disorganization and dissolution as factors associated with gang involvement. In this sample, we find that gang members are less likely than nongang members to live in intact homes. Whereas the majority of youth in our sample report living in intact homes, only half of the gang boys and 43% of the gang girls report living with both parents. In additional analyses not reported in the tables, we controlled for respondent race. We found no differences in family living status for African American (half of gang and nongang youth resided in single-parent families) or Asian (three fourths of these youth reported living with both parents) gang and nongang youth. For White, Hispanic, and other youth, however, gang members were more likely than nongang youth to live in single-parent homes.

ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES

Elsewhere we have reported on the rates of male and female involvement in delinquent activity, noting that gang girls are considerably more delinquent than nongang boys (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). In fact, gang girls are very similar to gang boys in the types of illegal acts they commit. They do differ, however, in the volume of crime committed: Girl gang members commit fewer crimes than do gang boys. Of concern in this analysis is the extent to which gang girls are involved in illegal activities commonly attributed to gang members. Recall that some commentators maintain that gang girls are primarily involved in auxiliary behaviors (i.e., sexual promiscuity) and do not engage in “normal” gang crime. Table 2 reports the ever prevalence and annual frequency rates for boys and girls who reported being in a gang. Although a smaller percentage of the gang girls report engaging
in these illegal acts and at lower frequencies, it is clear that these girls are more than mere appendages to the gang boys. They are involved in assaults, robberies, gang fights, and drug sales at substantial rates.

The gang boys are more delinquent than the girls, but the girls are far from innocent bystanders. Fewer gang girls admit to ever committing the offenses listed in Table 2 than do the gang boys, yet 39% of the girls report attacking someone with a weapon, 21% indicate that they have shot at someone because they were told to by someone else, 78% have been involved in gang fights, and 65% have carried hidden weapons. And it is not that they have engaged in these behaviors only once. The gang girls attacked someone an average of 2.48 times in the previous 12 months, participated in more than seven gang fights each, and hit someone with the intention of hurting him or her an average of more than eight times. On the whole, the girls report committing about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SRD Item</th>
<th>Males Ever Prevalence</th>
<th>Males Annual Frequency</th>
<th>Females Ever Prevalence</th>
<th>Females Annual Frequency</th>
<th>Ratio of Male to Female Offending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carried hidden weapon</td>
<td>83% 17.67</td>
<td>65% 7.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegally spray paint</td>
<td>63% 9.39</td>
<td>46% 3.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.6:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit someone to hurt</td>
<td>84% 12.05</td>
<td>81% 8.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacked someone</td>
<td>57% 5.12</td>
<td>39% 2.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbed someone</td>
<td>34% 3.53</td>
<td>17% 1.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.7:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been in a gang fight</td>
<td>85% 9.57</td>
<td>78% 7.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shot at someone</td>
<td>34% 2.38</td>
<td>21% 1.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold marijuana</td>
<td>63% 10.76</td>
<td>53% 6.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold other drugs</td>
<td>36% 6.15</td>
<td>26% 2.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization item</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been hit</td>
<td>71% 5.88</td>
<td>64% 2.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been robbed</td>
<td>33% 2.09</td>
<td>10% 0.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been attacked</td>
<td>50% 2.94</td>
<td>27% 0.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: SRD = self-reported delinquency.

a. Respondents were asked: “Have you ever...?”
b. Respondents were asked: “How many times in the past 12 months have you...?” Responses were truncated at 52 to reduce the effect of extreme scores.
c. p < .01, based on chi-square test for ever prevalence.
d. p < .01, based on t-test for annual frequency.
half as many crimes as do the boys, with ratios ranging from a low of 1.2 for involvement in gang fights to a high of 2.7 for robbery.

The gang girls are less likely than the gang boys to be victims of crime. Whereas the majority of gang girls have been hit in the past, only 10% have ever been robbed and 27% have been attacked by someone trying to seriously hurt them. The boys report substantially higher levels of victimization in the past, with one third having been robbed and half of them having been attacked. Their annual victimization rates are two to five times greater than those of the girls.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GANGS

Gang members were asked a series of questions about their gangs. Interestingly, as summarized in Table 3, there were virtually no differences between the girls’ and boys’ descriptions of their gangs. With respect to the organizational structure of the gangs, the gang girls indicated a slightly greater level of organization than did the boys; the girls were more likely to report that their gang had established leaders, specific rules, and role specialization. With the exception of these differences, the gang girls and gang boys seemed to describe very similar gangs, whether describing gang organization or gang activities. Two thirds or more of the gang members attributed the following characteristics to their gangs: being able to join prior to age 13; having initiation rites and established leaders; having specific rules and some degree of role specialization; having symbols or colors; providing protection for each other; and engaging in illegal activities, including fighting other gangs, stealing, selling marijuana and other drugs, and destroying property.

With regard to the gender composition of the gangs, only 10 (4.2%) girls stated that their gang was composed of girls only, whereas 39 (10.3%) of the gang boys indicated their gangs were unisex (data not shown). The remaining 536 (92%) gang youth indicated that girls and boys belonged to their gangs. When questioned about their location in the gang, the boys and girls were equally likely to state that they were core members. Respondents were asked to think of their gang as a circle, with a 1 being in the middle and a 5 being on the outside. Forty-five percent of boys and girls circled a 1 or a 2, our definition of core membership.
The gang youth also were asked to indicate why they joined their gang. They were presented a list of eight common reasons for joining gangs and asked to circle those reasons that contributed to their joining. Table 4 provides a summary of these results. With the exception of boys being more likely to join to get money, there were no gender differences. Approximately half of all the gang members joined for one of the following reasons: for fun, for protection, to get respect, to get money, or because a friend was in the gang. Only 6% or 7% of either gender indicated that they had been forced to join their gang.

Gang members were asked a series of seven questions tapping their gang attitudes. Response categories for the attitudinal items ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) such that the higher the score, the more they agreed with the statement. Table 5 lists these questions and the mean score for gang girls and gang boys. As can be seen, there is considerable similarity between males and females, although the girls express an overall higher level of attachment to the
It is worth noting that on these five-point Likert items, the average score of approximately 3.5 indicates a relatively modest level of attachment to the gang.

The three questions that tap an emotional or affective aspect of gang membership were answered more favorably by girls than boys. That is, the girls agreed more strongly with the following three statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for Joining the Gang by Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males (n = 380)</th>
<th>Females (n = 237)</th>
<th>Total (N = 617)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For fun</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For protection</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend was in the gang</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A brother or sister was in the gang</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to join</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get respect</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For money*</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To fit in better</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* *p < .05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>t-Test Comparisons of Gang Attachment by Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang makes me feel important.*</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>(1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang members provide support and loyalty</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in a gang makes me feel respected.</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>(1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a gang member makes me feel useful.</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a gang member makes me feel that I belong somewhere.*</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>(1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really enjoy being a member of my gang.</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My gang is like a family to me.*</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>(1.38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

* *p < .05.
than did the boys: “My gang is like a family to me,” “Being a gang member makes me feel like I really belong somewhere,” and “Being in a gang makes me feel important.” These gender differences do suggest that there is a qualitative difference between the gang girls and gang boys. When it comes to being attached to gangs, girls indicate a greater affective bond than do boys. Of interest, however, is the extent to which this difference in attachment represents a more general gender difference as opposed to a gang girl/gang boy difference. We will return to this issue in the discussion section.

To further explore these differences and to address the impression that gang girls are more socially isolated than gang boys, responses to nine questions measuring self-esteem and social isolation were examined. Table 6 provides a summary of the comparison of responses by gang boys and gang girls. The larger the mean response to these questions, the greater is the perception of social isolation. The gang youth generally disagree with statements that they are lonely in school,

### TABLE 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social isolation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even though there are lots of students around, I often feel lonely at school.</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(1.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I feel lonely when I’m with my friends.</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I feel lonely when I’m with my family.</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
<td>(1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-esteem</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a useful person to have around.</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.14)</td>
<td>(1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that I am a person of worth, at least as much as others.</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a person, I do a good job these days.*</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.16)</td>
<td>(1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to do things as well as most other people.*</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel good about myself.*</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.22)</td>
<td>(1.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I do a job, I do it well.*</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.19)</td>
<td>(1.18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

*  

p < .05.
when with their friends, or with their families. That is, as a group, the
gang members do not indicate that they are isolated from their family
or friends. The gang girls, however, express lower levels of disagree-
ment with the statements than do the gang boys. This finding config-
ures well with the previous finding about the affective nature of gang
membership for girls—an issue we will address in the next section.
This is especially the case with the statement, “I sometimes feel lonely
when I’m with my family.”

Four of the six questions measuring self-esteem reflect lower levels
of self-esteem among gang girls than gang boys. The gang boys ap-
pear to have quite positive self-assessments. For the most part, the
gang girls also indicate positive self-assessments but not at the same
level as the boys. The girls are less likely than the gang boys to feel
good about themselves and to feel competent in things they do. Multi-
variate analyses (not reported here) confirmed the ability of the social
isolation and self-esteem measures to distinguish between gang boys
and gang girls. Elsewhere (Deschenes & Esbensen, in press) we com-
pare gang girls to nongang girls. As with the comparison to gang boys,
the gang girls report significantly lower self-esteem and greater isola-
tion from their families than do the nongang girls. We will now turn to
a discussion of these gender differences in behavior and attitudes.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

In this article we have attempted to provide a descriptive account of
young gang members and to compare the gang experiences of boys
and girls. Most gang research has been restricted to single gangs, sin-
gle sites, or a small sample of gang members, making comparisons be-
tween male and female gang members difficult. In the study reported
here, almost 6,000 middle school students in 11 different cities across
the United States were surveyed. A total of 623 of these students met
our restricted definition of being a gang member, with 62% being
male and 38% female. Gang girls are clearly not as rare as law en-
forcement estimates indicate. As we have discussed elsewhere (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998), however, the disparate estimates of female
gang participation may be more an artifact of methodological differ-
ences and sampling issues than of any real difference. It is our hope
that the descriptive information about the gangs to which these youth belong will contribute to the growing body of research examining gender issues in youth gangs (e.g., Bjerregard & Smith, 1993; Cohen et al., 1995; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993).

Limitations of the current data should be remembered as we discuss the four research questions posed at the outset of this article. The eighth-grade sample may exclude some high-risk students (i.e., truants and expelled students) that bias the estimates of gang membership provided in our analyses. In addition, given some evidence that girls exit gangs at an earlier age than boys, this young sample may overstate the actual distribution of girls in gangs. Our purpose is not to claim that one method or one estimate is better than the other. Rather, our purpose is to bring clarity to the quite disparate estimates of female participation in gangs. In this light, we encourage future research to include not only multiple methods but diverse age groups as well and to consider the possibility that gangs are not the exclusive domain of young males.

Our main objective in the research reported here was to examine the differences and similarities of the gang experience for boys and girls, as measured through survey methods. These findings do not support the notion that gang girls are ancillary members or that they are excluded from the illegal and violent activities in which male gang members are involved. The gang girls commit a wide variety of offenses, similar to the pattern exhibited by gang boys, only at a slightly lower frequency. These findings bolster other recent reports (e.g., Chesney-Lind, 1997; Huizinga, 1997) that claim female involvement in violent crime is substantial, at least greater than commonly believed. We suggest it is high time for a conscientious inclusion of females in the study of gangs and violence in general, not just for academic reasons but also to identify and design gang- and violence-prevention programs that include girls in the target population.

Another question posed at the outset concerned the perceived organization and structural aspects of gangs. Interestingly, there were virtually no gender differences with regard to the following areas of inquiry: reasons for joining gangs, activities in which the gang members were involved, and organizational aspects of the gangs. Overall, the gang experience, in terms of involvement in criminal activity and perceptions of the gang, is remarkably similar for boys and girls.
Gender differences, however, were found when we compared responses to questions measuring social isolation and self-esteem. It appears that the gang girls do differ from gang boys in terms of their perceived social isolation, their self-esteem, and the emotional fulfillment that they receive from their gangs. Although the girls experience the same structural aspects of the gangs, there appear to be qualitative differences between the gang boys and girls. As is the case in other contexts (e.g., educational institutions, workplace, and family), males and females may well describe the organizational context in the same manner, but their reactions and experiences in these settings are different.

These observed differences between gang girls and gang boys, when viewed within adolescent developmental literature should not be unexpected. As noted previously, distinct gender differences have been observed in elementary school playground behavior (Thorne, 1993), in peer interactions (Thorne & Luria, 1986), and in group dynamics (Lees, 1993). Thorne and Luria, for instance, observed elementary schoolchildren in a variety of supervised and unsupervised situations. They concluded that,

"Groups of boys experience shared excitement and bonding focused on public rule transgression. Girls are organized in friendship pairs linked in shifting coalitions and bond more through mutual self-disclosure; they teach and learn strategies for maintaining and ending intimacy. (p. 176)"

Similarly, Lees (1993) notes that,

"The contrast between the girls' and boys' groups was startling. The girls interacted and were introspective, talked about relationships and feelings, worries and concerns. The boys all talked at the same time, interrupted each other, rarely listened to what other boys said and vied for attention and dominance; they were very lively. (p. 9)"

To what extent, however, do such gender differences affect self-assessments and perceptions of social isolation? Are the gang girls represented in this study different from gang boys, or are girls simply different from boys? Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest that girls traversing adolescence adapt survival strategies different from those
of boys, often becoming disconnected from themselves and others. The girls they studied tended to become withdrawn and less outspoken as they entered adolescence.

Open conflict and free speaking that were part of girls’ daily living thus gave way to more covert forms of responding to hurt feelings or disagreements with relationships so that some girls came to ignore or not know signs of emotional or physical abuse. (p. 218)

Analyses of nongang youth found that the girls reported significantly higher levels of social isolation than did the boys and lower levels of self-esteem on three of the six self-esteem items. In an earlier publication in which we examined predictors of gang membership, we found separate effects of gender and gang membership, as well as an interaction effect of these two measures on perceptions of social isolation (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998). For self-esteem, we found no direct gang effect but did find a gender and a gender/gang interaction effect. It does appear that whereas girls report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of social isolation than do boys, this difference is more pronounced among gang girls.

NOTES

1. In the Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994) survey, however, they note that law enforcement records may provide substantial underestimates of the number of gang girls, due to idiosyncratic recording practices. They state that “in a number of cities females, as a matter of policy, were never classified as gang members. In other jurisdictions, females were relegated to the status of ‘associate’ members” (p. 8).

2. Recent ethnographic work by Fleisher (1998) and Miller (1998a) has begun to address the paucity of information about young gang girls. Their research has included a wider array of females, including girls as young as 13 years in their samples.

3. In another article, Esbensen and Osgood (1997) examined program effects. As part of those analyses, preexisting differences between the G.R.E.A.T. program students and comparison group were examined. No systematic differences on demographic characteristics were found between the two groups.

4. With the program’s origin in Phoenix, cities in Arizona and New Mexico were overrepresented in the early stages of the G.R.E.A.T. program. Thus, cities such as Albuquerque, Tucson, Scottsdale, and other smaller cities in the Southwest were excluded from the eligible pool of potential sites.

5. Passive consent procedures (i.e., a procedure that requires parents to respond only if they do not want their child to participate in a research project) were approved in all but the Torrance
site. The number of parental refusals at each school ranged from zero to 2% at one school. Thus, participation rates (the percentage of students in attendance on the day of administration actually completing questionnaires) varied between 98% and 100% at the passive consent sites. Participation rates in Torrance, where active consent procedures were required, ranged from 53% to 75% of all eighth-grade students in each of the four schools. Five weeks of intensive efforts to obtain active parental consent in Torrance produced an overall return rate of 90% (72% affirmative and 18% refusals). Despite repeated mailings, telephone calls, and incentives, 10% of parents failed to return the consent form. Ninety percent of those students with parental permission completed the questionnaires. For a discussion of active parental consent procedures and its effect on response rates, see Esbensen et al., 1996.

6. For further discussion of this definitional issue, see Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991); Maxson and Klein (1990); or Winfree, Fuller, Vigil, and Mays (1992). We concur with Klein (1995) that it is the illegal activities of gangs that is of research and policy interest. For that reason, we restrict our definition of gangs to include only those youth who report that their gangs are involved in illegal activities.

7. The skewness of self-report frequency data presents analysis problems. Various approaches can be used in attempts to remedy this problem, including transforming the data using the natural log, truncating at the 90th percentile (Nagin & Smith, 1990), or truncating the high-frequency responses according to some conceptual reasoning. We chose to truncate items at 52. Our premise is that commission of most of these acts on a weekly basis constitutes high-frequency offending. We are thus able to examine these high-frequency offenders without sacrificing the detail of open-ended self-report techniques.

8. The social isolation, self-esteem, and gang attachment items are Likert-type statements with response categories ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

REFERENCES


Finn-Aage Esbensen is a professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is currently involved in several projects examining juvenile delinquency, with a special focus on gang activity. He is principal investigator of a 5-year NIJ funded national evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training program. From 1999 through 2001, he is serving as editor of Justice Quarterly.

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L. Thomas Winfree, Jr. is a professor of Criminal Justice at New Mexico State University. He has published more than 70 articles and book chapters related to the issues of juvenile delinquency and juvenile justice. He is coauthor of Crime and Justice: An Introduction (Nelson-Hall) and Understanding Crime: Theory and Practice (Nelson-Hall). He also coedited Expert Witnesses: Criminologists in the Classroom (State University of New York Press).