

Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective

Gang membership has long been understood to have a disruptive influence on adolescent development and to contribute disproportionately to the rate of delinquency and crime. The exact nature of the impact and the long-term effects on individuals, however, have not been well understood. This book uses longitudinal data to examine for the first time the developmental consequences of gang membership, not just the short-term effects during membership itself, but its longer-term influence on the life course.

This longitudinal approach is made possible by data from a unique and important study of antisocial behavior, the Rochester Youth Development Study, which followed 1,000 adolescents through their early adult years. The subjects include adolescents who were gang members and others who were not, allowing the authors to compare motives, patterns of behavior, and recurring problems with caregivers and the law, education, peer relations, and career paths. The findings indicate that multiple, serious developmental deficits lead to gang membership and that membership, in turn, leads to an increase in serious and violent delinquency and lingering problems thereafter.

The authors, experts in criminal behavior and adolescent development, explain the social and psychological factors that lead some youths to join a gang. They show that gang members are responsible for the lion's share of serious and violent delinquency – including drug use and selling, and gun ownership and carrying – and that it is gang membership itself that facilitates these behaviors. Girl gang members, for example, exhibited higher levels of delinquent behavior than delinquent boys who were not gang members. Finally the authors demonstrate the ways in which gang membership generates “disorder” across the life course. Youths who join gangs are more likely to be arrested, to drop out of school, to become teen parents, and to exhibit other developmental problems. Gang membership has continuing effects into adulthood on educational achievements, job prospects, and economic status.

This book offers the most empirically informed explanation of the ripple effect of gangs on individuals and on society and the most compelling argument for early intervention for at-risk youths who join gangs.

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T. P. Thornberry , M. D. Krohn , A. J. Lizotte , C. A. Smith , K. Tobin

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Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective

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To Malcolm W. Klein,
gang leader extraordinaire

Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>About the Authors</i>	xv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
1 A Life-Course Orientation to the Study of Gang Membership	1
2 Research Procedures: The Sample and the Data	11
3 Characteristics of Gang Members	32
4 The Antecedents of Gang Membership	56
5 The Origins of Gang Membership	77
6 Gangs as a Facilitating Context for Delinquent Behavior	96
7 Gangs, Guns, and Crime	122
8 Gangs and Other Law-Violating Youth Groups	140
9 Long-Term Consequences of Gang Membership	163
10 Gangs in Developmental Perspective: Substantive and Policy Implications	181
<i>Appendix A: Delinquency Indices</i>	205
<i>Appendix B: Prevalence of Gang Membership</i>	210
<i>Appendix C: Impact of Gang Membership</i>	212
<i>References</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	231
	ix

Tables and Figures

Tables

2.1	Subject and Parent Retention Rates, Wave 1 to Wave 12	<i>page</i> 17
2.2	Demographic Characteristics of the Total Panel, Those Retained at Wave 12, and Those Not Retained	18
2.3	Prevalence of Delinquency and Drug Use at Wave 1 for the Total Panel, Those Retained at Wave 12, and Those Not Retained	20
2.4	Description of Core Measures	25
3.1	Ever Prevalence of Gang Membership, Wave 2 through Wave 9	33
3.2	Annual Prevalence of Gang Membership	35
3.3	Number of Years of Gang Membership	39
3.4	Pattern of Multiyear Gang Membership, Males Only	40
3.5	Pattern of Multiwave Gang Membership, Males Only	41
3.6	Ever Prevalence of Delinquency and Drug Use by Ever Prevalence of Gang Membership	43
3.7	Cumulative Frequency of Delinquency and Drug Use by Ever Prevalence of Gang Membership	44
3.8	Delinquency and Drug Use by Age of Joining a Gang	45
3.9	Delinquency and Drug Use by Duration of Gang Membership	46
3.10	Prevalence of Gang Membership and Percentage of Cumulative Delinquent Acts Attributable to Gang Members	49
3.11	Prevalence of Gang Membership and Percentage of Delinquent Acts Attributable to Gang Members by Wave, Males Only	52

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

xi

3.12	Prevalence of Gang Membership and Percentage of Delinquent Acts Attributable to Gang Members by Wave, Females Only	53
4.1	Means for Dichotomous Risk Factors	64
4.2	Bivariate Odds Ratios between Risk Factors and Joining a Gang between Waves 3 and 9	66
4.3	Bivariate Odds Ratios between Risk Factors and Stability of Gang Membership, Males Only	71
5.1	Reasons for Joining a Gang, by Gender	79
5.2	Reasons for Joining a Gang, by Race/Ethnicity	80
5.3	Reasons for Joining a Gang, by Onset of Gang Membership and Duration of Gang Membership, Males Only	80
5.4	Estimating the Causal Model: Reduced-Form Equations Predicting Gang Membership, Males Only	87
6.1	Number and Percentage of Subjects in Various Groupings of Gang Membership, Males Only	102
6.2	Hypothetical Relationships Expected under the Facilitation and Selection Models	104
6.3	Relationship between General Delinquency and Periods of Active Gang Membership, Males Only	106
6.4	Relationship between Violent Delinquency and Periods of Active Gang Membership, Males Only	108
6.5	Relationship between Drug Use and Periods of Active Gang Membership, Males Only	109
6.6	Relationship between Drug Sales and Periods of Active Gang Membership, Males Only	110
6.7	The Impact of Gang Membership Status on Self-Reported General Delinquency, OLS Estimates, Males Only	114
6.8	The Impact of Gang Membership Status on Self-Reported Violent Delinquency, OLS Estimates, Males Only	115
6.9	The Impact of Gang Membership Status on Self-Reported Drug Use, OLS Estimates, Males Only	116
6.10	The Impact of Gang Membership Status on Self-Reported Drug Sales, OLS Estimates, Males Only	117
6.11	The Impact of Gang Membership Status on Involvement in Delinquency and Drugs, Random Effects Models, Males Only	118
7.1	Percentage of Gang Members and Nonmembers Who Carry Guns and Who Own and Carry Guns, Males Only	128
7.2	Odds Ratios Predicting Whether Subjects Are Gun Carriers and Gun Owners, Males Only	130
7.3	Predicting the Incidence of Self-Reported Delinquency and Drug Use, Gun Carriers, Males Only	133

7.4	Predicting the Incidence of Self-Reported Delinquency and Drug Use, Gun Owners, Males Only	134
7.5	Prevalence of Gang Membership and Gun Ownership or Carrying and Percentage of Cumulative Delinquent Acts Attributable to Gang Members, Males Only	136
7.6	Odds Ratios Predicting Gun Ownership, Males Only	138
8.1	Mean Scores on Peer Delinquency for Gang Members and Nonmembers, Males Only	144
8.2	Frequency of Self-Reported General Delinquency for Gang Members and Nonmembers, Males Only	146
8.3	Mean Scores on Peer Delinquency for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Males Only	148
8.4	Mean Scores on Peer Delinquency for Gang Members and Nonmembers, Females Only	150
8.5	Mean Scores on Peer Delinquency for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Females Only	152
8.6	The Relative Impact of Gang Membership and Association with Delinquent Peers on Delinquency, Males Only	160
8.7	The Relative Impact of Gang Membership and Association with Delinquent Peers on Delinquency, Females Only	161
9.1	Bivariate Relationships between Gang Membership and Precocious Transitions, Males Only	169
9.2	Bivariate Relationships between Gang Membership and Precocious Transitions, Females Only	170
9.3	Relationship between Gang Membership and Number of Precocious Transitions	171
9.4	Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Predicting Precocious Transitions, Males Only	173
9.5	Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Predicting Precocious Transitions, Females Only	175
9.6	OLS Regression Predicting Total Number of Transitions	176
9.7	Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Predicting Adult Arrests, Males Only	177
9.8	Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Predicting Adult Arrests, Females Only	178

Figures

2.1	Research Design: Rochester Youth Development Study	12
4.1	Cumulative Risk for Gang Membership, Variable-Based Model	72
4.2	Cumulative Risk for Gang Membership, Domain-Based Model	74

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

xiii

5.1	Illustrative Reasons for Joining a Gang	78
5.2	Causal Processes Associated with Gang Membership	84
8.1	Frequency of Self-Reported Violence for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Males Only	147
8.2	Frequency of Self-Reported General Delinquency for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Males Only	148
8.3	Frequency of Self-Reported Violence for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Males Only	149
8.4	Frequency of Self-Reported General Delinquency for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Females Only	151
8.5	Frequency of Self-Reported Violence for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Females Only	151
8.6	Frequency of Self-Reported General Delinquency for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Females Only	152
8.7	Frequency of Self-Reported Violence for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Females Only	153
8.8	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Use for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Males Only	155
8.9	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Use for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Males Only	155
8.10	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Sales for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Males Only	156
8.11	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Sales for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Males Only	156
8.12	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Use for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Females Only	157
8.13	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Use for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Females Only	158
8.14	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Sales for Gang Members and Subjects with Highly Delinquent Peers, Females Only	158
8.15	Frequency of Self-Reported Drug Sales for Gang Members and a Matched Number of Nonmembers, Females Only	159

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Preface

When you're a Jet
You're a Jet all the way,
From your first cigarette
To your last dyin' day.
— *West Side Story*

American popular culture has built up a strong mythology about street gangs and their members. Some of it is fueled by movie and song – from the lyrics of Bernstein and Sondheim's classic Broadway hit to the grittier depiction of gang life in contemporary gangsta rap and Spike Lee movies. Some of it is fueled by the coverage of gangs in the mass media; some of it by autobiographies like Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1976) and Sanyika Shakur's *Monster* (1998). Whatever the source, these images are entertaining and have taken firm root in popular views of gangs and gang members; their accuracy is another matter entirely.

Indeed, at one and the same time, they glorify and demonize gang members, presenting a warped picture that misses the mark in fundamental ways. For example, the idea that gang life is permanent, reflected in the lyrics that opened this book, is dead wrong. Gang membership, for the vast majority of gang members in America, turns out to be a rather fleeting, transient adolescent dalliance. It is the job of science to correct the record, to describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible, to attempt to explain why it happens, and to propose an appropriate response. This book is one contribution to this long-term effort.

It differs somewhat from previous approaches to this topic. For, unlike much of the scientific literature on gang behavior, we embed the study of gang members in a long-term investigation of a community sample of individual adolescents. Doing so allows us to examine the influence of the

gang from a life-course perspective, to address old questions in a new way, and to address new questions about the origins and consequences of gang membership. We hope that the results of this analysis add to an accurate understanding of street gangs and help in the development of programs to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, street gangs from the American scene.

Acknowledgments

This study is part of a larger project, the Rochester Youth Development Study, a longitudinal investigation of antisocial behavior that began in 1986. Any study of that duration accumulates many debts along the way and owes its successes to many people. We would like to acknowledge some of them here.

The Rochester project would not have been possible without the continuing support of its funding agencies. The project was initiated by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the U.S. Department of Justice, as part of its Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. OJJDP was the primary supporting agency through 1992 and has supported us, without interruption, since 1986. It is rare for a research project to receive such enduring support from a sponsoring agency, and we are deeply appreciative of the confidence in our work that it reflects.

Over these 16 years we have benefited from working with many of OJJDP's professional staff. Pamela Swain and Barbara Tatem Kelley initiated this project and were our earliest supporters. They were followed by Donni LeBoeuf, Buddy Howell, Betty Chemers, Charlotte Kerr, Elen Grigg, and Kathy Browning. We have also had the support and encouragement of several OJJDP Administrators, especially Terrence Donahue, John Wilson, Shay Bilchik, and John Wilson (again).

Buddy Howell, now retired as OJJDP's director of research, deserves special recognition. He shepherded the project through difficult days, pushed us to expand the scope and quality of our work, and skillfully used our results in the development of comprehensive strategies to prevent juvenile delinquency. He was also the first to see the value of studying gangs in the context of a longitudinal design and was responsible for the particular grant to study gangs (grant no. 95-JD-FX-0015) that led to this book. After his retirement

he read (all too often) these chapters, improving upon them every time. He is a remarkable friend and colleague.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse supported much of the data collection and research that led to this book. Our project officer, Mario De La Rosa, was always helpful. The Rochester project also received support from the National Science Foundation and currently the National Institute of Mental Health. Although their support is less directly focused on the issues addressed in this book, the overall project could not have been accomplished without their help and it is gratefully recognized.

We also want to recognize the contributions of Mac Klein, to whom this book is dedicated. Mac was a member of the National Advisory Board for the three projects of the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. In that capacity he was a strong advocate for the projects and helped steer us through difficult waters. Mac has dedicated his scholarly career to the study of gangs, and it seems to us that he never understood that the Rochester project was not really a “gang study”; he just assumed that, like all criminological research, we should study gangs! He was right, of course, and his focus led us to the importance of this topic and to this book. Along the way he served as a mentor, critic, colleague, adviser, and friend. Like Buddy, he was also forced to read too many versions of these chapters, but always to our benefit.

We also acknowledge the contributions of other veteran gang researchers who reviewed the manuscript, especially Scott Decker. Scott’s careful reading of the manuscript and detailed comments have improved this book substantially. The authors, of course, are responsible for the final product but we recognize the positive contributions of many others, especially Mac, Buddy, and Scott.

Over the past 16 years we have benefited greatly from collaborative work with our companion projects in the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency: the Denver Youth Survey and the Pittsburgh Youth Study. We have learned a great deal from our colleagues in Denver, particularly David Huizinga and Finn Esbensen, and in Pittsburgh, particularly Rolf Loeber, Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, and David Farrington. All of the projects are much stronger together than they ever could have been as separate research undertakings. We received excellent advice from our National Advisory Board – Alfred Blumstein, Dante Cicchetti, Malcolm Klein, Lloyd Ohlin, and Lee Robins – as well as the Rochester project’s Advisory Board – Rand Conger, Rex Forehand, and Charles Wellford. Dante Cicchetti, a member of the University of Rochester faculty, pulled double duty, not only serving on the Advisory Board but also helping introduce us to the Rochester community.

We owe a debt of thanks to many, many people in the Rochester community. First and foremost are the 2,000 members of the Rochester study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xxi

The 1,000 adolescents and the 1,000 parents in our sample gave unstintingly of their time. Their willingness to be interviewed and reinterviewed – for most of them 12 times – and to share their private thoughts, feelings, and behaviors with our staff was absolutely essential to our research. We can never adequately repay them, but we hope the impact that our research findings have on developing better programs and policies for youth offers them some compensation.

Special thanks is owed to the officials at the Rochester City School District. Without their help at the outset of the study we would not have been able to identify and select the sample to initiate this long-term effort. We are particularly grateful to Peter McWalters, the superintendent of schools, and to David Hunt, the supervising director of Student Data, Testing, and Records at the time. We were also helped by Ann Brown, Judy Klein-Henwood, and Warren Crichlow at various stages of our research. During the early waves of the study we conducted almost all of the adolescent interviews in the schools, a process greatly facilitated by the principals, vice-principals, and counselors. Despite our efforts to be nonintrusive, we did intrude and we appreciate their tolerance and help.

As we began this research project, two New York State cabinet officers introduced us to officials in Monroe County and in the City of Rochester. Lawrence Kurlander, a former Monroe County district attorney, was the director of the Office of Criminal Justice and Joseph Coccozza was the executive director of the Council on Children and Families. We benefited greatly from their advice, good judgment, and political savvy.

We have also collected information from many Monroe County and Rochester city agencies. At the Monroe County Department of Social Services we are particularly grateful to Diane Larter and Dan Ross, not only for providing access to crucial data files but for thoughtful readings of several of our papers. Over the years the Office of the Monroe County Executive has been very helpful. We particularly appreciate the assistance we received from Craig Osborne in the 1990s and from James Mulley more recently. The Mayor's Office of the City of Rochester has been equally helpful. In particular we thank Mayor William A. Johnson, and William Faucette and Earl Isaac of his staff.

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Howard Relin, the Monroe County district attorney, was also a firm supporter over the years.

We have received assistance from a number of New York State agencies. Leonard Morgenbesser, Dave Clark, and Karl Gohlke of the Department of Correctional Services were particularly helpful in arranging for us to interview subjects who were incarcerated. Charles Devane and William Baccaglioni were equally helpful at the Division for Youth. Our collection of statewide arrest histories at the Division of Criminal Justice Services was aided by Richard Rosen, Bruce Frederick, and Steve Greenstein.

Finally, and closer to home, we want to recognize the tremendous contributions made by the staff of the Rochester Youth Development Study. One of the great strengths of this study is the very high rate of subject retention over the course of the study. That is entirely due to the herculean efforts of the Rochester staff and our field director, William Miles. Bill has held that position since the inception of the project and has masterminded the data collection effort with care, professionalism, and the utmost loyalty to the project and to the study families. Since the late 1980s he has been aided by Jacquetta Daniels, field coordinator; Carol Wright, our senior interviewer; and Raymond Specht, who was also a field coordinator through the mid 1990s. We have benefited greatly from their level-headed advice and sheer hard work. We also want to recognize the other staff members and the many interviewers – too many to mention by name – who worked for the project over the years. Theirs is a difficult job, locating and interviewing a large sample, often in poor neighborhoods and in all kinds of weather. We believe the level of retention and the quality of our data are testimony to their accomplishments and the leadership provided by Bill and Jacquetta.

We have also been graced with outstanding colleagues and staff at the University at Albany. Margaret Farnworth, then on the faculty of the School of Criminal Justice, was a coprincipal investigator and Susan Stern, then a faculty member at the School of Social Welfare, was a research associate at the outset of the study. We benefited greatly from their contributions in the early years, especially their knowledge of measurement issues for structural position and family processes, respectively. We also benefit greatly from the statistical and methodological advice of our colleague, David McDowall, of the School of Criminal Justice.

Over the years we have had the pleasure of working with a number of graduate research assistants and we are happy the project has been able to contribute to their doctoral education and professional development. We would like to thank Oscar Best, Beth Bjerregaard, Trudy Bonsell, Elizabeth Cass, Deborah Chard-Wierschem, Rebekah Chu, Lori Collins-Hall, Martin Gottschalk, Nicole Hendrix, Gregory Howard, Nancy Jakubowyc, Sung Joon Jang, Carolyn Levy, Jessica Mass, Cynthia Perez McCluskey, Craig Rivera, James Tesoriero, and Kimberly Young for their assistance. We would

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xxiii

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The Albany professional staff has been absolutely essential to the success of this project. First Sharon Wright and now Arleen DeGonzague have served as the administrative assistant for the Hindelang Criminal Justice Research Center, and Deb Coppola as secretary. Their efficiency in preparing and in monitoring the project's various budgets and administrative matters is remarkable and made our lives much easier. We also want to thank Jeanette Megas and Michele Carlton who served as the project secretaries and who, in their usual efficient ways, typed this manuscript.

Marilyn Hubbard, as director of data entry, is responsible for translating the massive amount of data collected in Rochester into precise, clean data files. She performs this task with care and diligence, thereby ensuring the quality of our analytic efforts. Marilyn helps in innumerable other ways to make the project run smoothly.

Patty Glynn was and Adrienne Freeman-Gallant is the project data manager/analyst. Their care for the accuracy of the data and our analytic approach has served the project exceptionally well over the years.

Finally, we want to express our deep appreciation to the project's research coordinator, Pamela Porter. As the coordinator she contributes to virtually all aspects of the project: administration, data analysis, measurement, proposal preparation, editing, liaison with the field staff, and more. She does so with an efficiency and commitment that is startling. Thank you.

And, finally, to all of the project staff, in Rochester and in Albany, we want you to know how much we know how much our success is due to your efforts. We realize that life on this project can be a bit chaotic at times, but it is well worth the effort, as is evident from results and policy recommendations found in this book.