

GANG RISK FACTORS

1. What are risk factors?

Risk factors are conditions in the individual or environment that can predict an increased likelihood of developing a problem. Several studies have identified causes or *risk factors* that, if present for a given individual, make it more likely he or she will develop a problem behavior, including joining a gang (Howell, 2003a; Howell and Egley, forthcoming; Pollard et al., 1999). Although research has not yet clearly identified unique risk factors for gang involvement, in general, it is predicted by the same risk factors as general forms of delinquency and violence; however, youth with elevated risk for gang-joining tend to have more risk factors than youth at risk for general delinquency.

2. Why is knowledge of risk factors important?

Many community collaborative approaches call for an integrated approach incorporating not only intervention and suppression efforts but prevention and early intervention as well, i.e., a continuum of program options. One of the purposes of this type of approach is to identify conditions in the environment and in the child that increase the risk of problem behavior early in childhood/adolescence and predict delinquency and gang involvement later on. The intent is that prevention and early intervention programs address and reduce these risk factors.

3. How are risk factors categorized?

Risk factors are often grouped into five developmental domains: individual, family, school, peers, and community. Howell and Egley (forthcoming) summarize what is known about risk factors for gang involvement as follows:

Community or Neighborhood Risk Factors. Several community or neighborhood risk factors predict gang membership. Gangs tend to cluster in high-crime, socially disorganized neighborhoods, where many youth are in trouble, feel unsafe, and are less attached to others in the community and where firearms are readily available. Gang members are more than twice as likely as non-gang members to own a gun for protection, and more likely to have peers who own guns for protection (Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995; Lizotte, Tesoriero, Thornberry, and Krohn, 1994); thus illegal gun ownership and carrying are key predictors of gang membership. Gang involvement also significantly increases the probability of subsequent gun carrying (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, and Howard, 2000). These findings are from a Rochester (New York) study which found that gang membership was the strongest predictor of hidden gun carrying only up to about age 16 (Lizotte et al., 2000). After this age, involvement in drug trafficking became the strongest predictor, especially when high amounts of drugs were sold.

Family Risk Factors. Family-level factors can be divided into two groups—structural variables and social process variables. Among the structural factors exhibiting a significant relationship with gang membership are family poverty, structural deficiency (not living with both biological parents), and low levels of parental education. However, these variables are often found to influence family process variables and thus are

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typically only indirectly associated with gang membership. Among the social process variables associated with gang membership are poor family management, including low parental supervision and attachment to and involvement with the child; proviolent attitudes; and child maltreatment. Sibling antisocial behavior is also a significant predictor. The gang serves as a sanctuary for troubled youth from troubled families (Fleisher, 1998). For girls, in particular, finding solace from a violent family life and personal protection are major motivations for gang joining (J. A. Miller, 2001; Moore, 1978). It has been suggested that gangs provide street socialization where the family leaves off or when social service agencies fail youths (Vigil, 2002).

School Risk Factors. Low achievement in school and having learning problems are among the strongest school-related predictors of gang membership. Related risk factors include low academic aspirations, low school attachment, low attachment to teachers, low parent expectations for their children's schooling, low commitment to school, and general academic failure--at least as early as the elementary school-level in the Seattle study (Hill et al., 1999). These deficits may well be compounded by having been negatively labeled by teachers (Esbensen et al., 1993) and corresponding low parent expectations (Thornberry et al., 2003). Future gang members are likely to have current gang members in their school classrooms (Curry and Spergel, 1992). Feeling unsafe at school also proved to be a strong correlate of gang membership in a cross-sectional study (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001). Thus, vulnerable students may seek protection in the gang (Howell and Lynch, 2000).

Peer Group Risk Factors. Peer delinquency is one of the strongest predictors of individual delinquency (Thornberry, 1998). In certain analyses, peer delinquency is also a significant predictor of gang membership, but results from more complex analyses in recent studies are less supportive, suggesting a more dynamic relationship. By comparison, gang membership is observed to be a significant predictor of individual delinquency while controlling for associations with delinquent peers (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, and Hawkins, 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003), leading scholars to conclude that gangs are distinctly different from other deviant peer groups. Associations with aggressive peers during early adolescence is a predictor of gang membership, but this "may reflect a general tendency for antisocial boys to associate with one another" (Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, et al., 1999:274). Indeed, research has observed that aggressive and antisocial youths affiliate with one another beginning in childhood (Coie and Miller-Johnson, 2001), and this pattern of aggressive friendships continues through adolescence (Cairns and Cairns, 1994). "Associates" of gang members are also part and parcel of a community's gang problem because they are more actively involved in delinquency than nongang youth (Curry, Decker, and Egley, 2002).

Individual Risk Factors. Involvement in general forms of delinquency and, specifically, violence are strong predictors of gang membership. The risk is elevated for youngsters who use drugs and are involved in delinquency (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). The individual risk factors of future gang members begin to play out at a very early age. Children who are on a trajectory of worsening antisocial behavior are more likely to join gangs (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Lahey et al., 1999).

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Early dating and precocious sexual activity increased the risk of gang involvement in the Rochester study (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Mental health problems as a risk factor for gang membership has not been well researched. However, several indicators of mental health problems have been shown to predict gang involvement, including hyperactivity, internalizing (e.g., depression or anxiety), and externalizing behaviors (e.g., conduct disorders and oppositional behavior). Child abuse and neglect are relatively strong predictors of depressive symptoms in early adolescence (Thornberry, Ireland, and Smith, 2001) and gang involvement (Thornberry et al., 2003). Other negative or stressful life events also elevate youths' risk of gang involvement (Thornberry et al., 2003).

4. How many risk factors make it likely that a youth will join a gang?

Risk factors have a cumulative impact; that is, the greater the numbers of risk factors that are present, the greater the likelihood of gang involvement. Hill et al. (1999) found in the Seattle study that children with seven or more risk factor indicators were 13 times more likely to join a gang than children with none or only one risk factor indicator. Nevertheless, only 32 percent of these youths joined a gang.

The presence of risk factors in multiple developmental domains appears to increase the likelihood of gang involvement even more. Rochester researchers investigated the predictive power of risk factors in multiple domains (Thornberry et al., 2003), finding that a majority (61 percent) of the boys and 40 percent of the girls who scored above the median in seven risk factor domains (area characteristics, family sociodemographic characteristics, parent-child relations, school, peers, individual characteristics, and early delinquency) were gang members. In contrast, approximately one-third of the boys and one-fifth of the girls who experienced risk in four to six domains joined a gang. Thus, for optimal impact, gang prevention and intervention programs not only need to address multiple risk factors, they also need to address a number of risk factors in multiple developmental domains.

5. Do protective factors mitigate risk factors?

Research on protective factors is still in its infancy. This research has been slower to develop than risk factor studies, in part because of the absence of a standard for determining what constitutes protection and also because little research has been done in this area. A related concern is confusion about whether protective factors are distinct from risk factors as developmental predictors of youth violence and gang involvement. The polar opposites of a single risk factor element can be considered to increase risk or provide protection. Family conflict is an example. Viewed along a continuum, high family conflict is seen as a risk factor, whereas low family conflict is considered a protective factor (Kirby and Fraser, 1997). Early academic achievement, the antithesis of low school performance, can be expected to protect children from gang involvement. However, protective factors are not simply the opposite extreme of risk factors (Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002). Other protective factors may reside in mental

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(e.g., cognitive ability) and social processes (e.g., self-improvement or self-efficacy initiatives) that are not linked to risk factors (Rutter, Giller, and Hagell, 1998, p. 211).

It is important to recognize that protection against delinquency involvement also serves to insulate youths from gang involvement—because gangs tend to recruit youths who already are delinquent (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 1993). Longitudinal studies in Rochester (Smith et al., 1995) and Denver (Browning and Huizinga, 1999) have identified key protective factors against delinquency. The latter study shows that the chances of a successful adolescence are not good until the number of protective factors far exceed the number of risk factors.

Although research has not established the main protective factors that buffer risk factors for gang involvement, many of them are suggested in the gang literature (see especially Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga and Weiher, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Maxon and Whitlock, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003; Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001; Wyrick, 2000). All of these protective factors need to be tested in experimental studies. Several of these protective factors were identified in a comprehensive review of common risk and protective factors in successful prevention programs (Durlak, 1998). Other protective factors can be inferred from the well-documented risk factors for gang membership.

Social support is a key protective factor that can occur in all of the protective factor domains (Durlak, 1998). Children and adolescents can be supported directly or indirectly by parents, peers, teachers, and other helpful persons in their daily lives. This form of protective support also has been called lifelines (Cairns and Cairns, 1994). Readers should keep in mind that some of these protective factors may be effective only in preventing child and adolescent involvement in delinquency and violence; however, these behaviors are risk factors for gang membership.

Source:

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