Boys Who Join Gangs: A Prospective Study of Predictors of First Gang Entry

Benjamin B. Lahey,1,2,5 Rachel A. Gordon,1,2 Rolf Loeber,3 Magda Stouthamer-Loober,3 and David P. Farrington4

Received February 12, 1998; revision received November 30, 1998; accepted January 19, 1999

In a representative sample of boys who were in the 7th grade of an urban public school system at the start of a 6-year longitudinal study, more African American boys (23.8%) than non-Hispanic White boys (3.9%) had entered an antisocial gang by age 19. There were too few White gang members to study, but among African American boys, first gang entry was predicted prospectively by both baseline conduct disorder (CD) behaviors and increasing levels of CD behaviors prior to gang entry. This suggests that gang entry may be a further developmental step for some boys who are already on a trajectory of worsening antisocial behavior. Having friends prior to gang entry who engaged in aggressive delinquency increased the risk of gang entry further, but only during early adolescence. Family income and parental supervision also independently predicted gang entry, but the direction of their influences depended on the youth's age.

KEY WORDS: Gangs; antisocial behavior; conduct disorder; ethnicity.

Membership in antisocial youth gangs has grown rapidly in the United States, with current estimates suggesting that more than 650,000 youths are members of gangs (Howell, 1998). These numbers are important because membership in antisocial youth gangs represents a significant public health problem in the United States. Membership in gangs is associated with markedly increased rates of antisocial behavior that not only harms victims but also exposes gang members to risk of injury, incarceration, and death (Ebsensen & Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1990; Hammond & Yung, 1993; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993).

Which youths are most likely to join gangs? The answer to this question is of both theoretical and practical importance. If reliable early predictors of gang entry can be identified, it may be possible to reduce rates of gang membership through focused prevention efforts. If such prevention efforts were successful, it might be possible to decrease both juvenile crime rates and risk of harm to gang members.

Two major competing models have been proposed to explain gang entry. Selection theories suggest that some youths join gangs because "birds of a feather flock together." That is, youths who already engage in antisocial behavior are hypothesized to be more likely to join together in gangs (Spergel, 1990; Staub, 1996). In contrast, socialization theories suggest that youths who join gangs are socialized into antisocial behavior during or after gang entry (Winfree, Backstrom, & Mays, 1994). For example, nonantisocial youths may join gangs for reasons of self-esteem, power, and protection, but are encouraged to participate in antisocial behavior by the group after joining. These two theories are not completely incompatible, as selection processes could explain gang entry, but being a member of a gang could further enhance antisocial behavior through social processes (Thornberry et al., 1993).

Findings from a number of cross-sectional studies are relevant to these theories of gang entry. Gang membership
is more common in neighborhoods in which gangs operate and neighborhoods with high crime rates and high availability of drugs (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Fagan, 1996). Gang members are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic status and single-parent families that provide harsh discipline and inadequate supervision (Winfrey et al., 1994), and they are more likely to have delinquent friends and to attend schools with members of gangs (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Winfrey et al., 1994). Although a substantial literature confirms this description of gang members (Thornberry, 1998), cross-sectional studies do not allow tests of competing theories of gang entry, as it is possible that some of the differences between gang members and nonmembers arose after the members entered gangs.

The most informative tests of theories of gang entry use prospective designs that provide information on youths prior to gang entry. In the Denver Youth Study (DYS; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weis, 1993) youths from high-crime neighborhoods who were 7–15 years of age at the time of Wave I were interviewed in a prospective design over four annual waves. Following Spergel (1990), gang membership was defined in the DYS on the basis of self-reported membership in a gang that was engaged in illegal activities. Although gang members constituted only 7% of the male sample in Wave 4, they committed 57% of all violent offenses, serious thefts, and drug sales reported by male sample members (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993). Among boys in the DYS, future gang members displayed increasingly greater severity of antisocial behavior and substance use over the years prior to gang entry. Girls who joined gangs did not show significantly higher rates of antisocial behavior prior to gang entry than girls who did not join gangs during the study, but the numbers of girls who joined gangs may have been too small to detect differences.

In the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS; Thornberry et al., 1993), youths from mostly high-crime neighborhoods who were in the 7th or 8th grade in public schools during the first wave were interviewed at 6-month intervals. Analyses of gang membership were limited to boys due to the small number of female gang members. Unlike the DYS, the definition of gangs in the RYDS was not limited to groups that were involved in antisocial behavior, but was defined on the basis of youth reports of membership in a “gang” or “posse.” In the RYDS, the 26% of boys who were a members of a gang during at least one 12-month period committed 80% of all violent crimes, 90% of all serious delinquent acts, and 73% of all drug sales reported by boys (Thornberry, 1998). In an early report from the RYDS covering 3 1/2 years of data collection (Thornberry et al., 1993), no differences in antisocial behavior prior to entering a gang were found between future gang members and youths who never entered a gang. In a later report that covered 4 1/2 years and used different analytic methods, however, the youth’s level of antisocial behavior in the years prior to gang entry did predict future gang entry (Thornberry, 1998). Other prospective predictors of gang entry included association with delinquent peers, low parental supervision, and availability of drugs (Thornberry, 1998).

The Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP; Hill, Howell, & Hawkins, 1996) similarly followed 800 youths from middle school into early adulthood. In the SSDP, youths who joined gangs were more likely to be of African American heritage than non-Hispanic White, were disproportionately from neighborhoods with high availability of drugs, and were from families with high numbers of changes in family structure and with family management problems. In addition, displaying more antisocial behavior and hyperactivity and associating with delinquent peers prior to gang entry predicted future gang membership.

Thus, the results of these three prospective studies are consistent with selection theories of gang entry, as the antisocial behavior of youths prior to gang membership was a significant predictor of subsequent gang entry. On the other hand, a number of peer, family, and neighborhood factors were also identified as significant predictors of future gang entry, raising the possibility that contextual factors may also promote gang entry. The present article presents analyses of data from the longitudinal Pittsburgh Youth Study (PYS; Loebner, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loebner, & Van Kammen, 1998). The goal of the present analyses is to attempt to replicate earlier findings that future gang entry is predicted by both the youth’s antisocial behavior prior to gang entry and family and neighborhood characteristics. We have analyzed these data in ways that address several weaknesses in previous longitudinal studies of gang entry. First, like all previous prospective studies, the PYS data are both “left truncated” (because none of the studies began early enough in childhood to antedate the beginning of the risk period for gang entry) and “right censored” (because they did not extend past the close of the risk period). Unlike previous studies, however, we use event history analysis to compensate for these factors. Second, like some previous studies, we examine the potential role of several contextual factors (peer, family, and neighborhood variables) in predicting gang entry, but unlike previous studies, we examine the role of these contextual factors while controlling for the youth’s antisocial behavior prior to gang entry to determine if they are independent predictors.

Third, the way in which gang membership was defined in previous prospective studies may have biased findings. In each study, gang membership in a given wave