Studies have found that gang membership and affiliation has a “facilitation effect on delinquency—that is, youth’s participation in delinquency increases dramatically when they join gangs, and declines significantly once they leave their gang” (Miller 2001). Women’s involvement in gangs and crime, violence, substance use, and high-risk sexual relations suggest similar trends, but more complex patterns. The difference between male and female gang members is that females commit fewer crimes than their male counterparts, but more than nongang males and females. Moreover, they are involved in less serious or violent crimes than male gang members because they are structurally excluded from male delinquent activities, or possibly decide to exclude themselves. Even though substance use is reportedly higher among girl gang members than girls who are not in gangs, girls in gangs have less of a tendency to use substances than male gang members. Also, there is a wide continuum of drug use among girls associated with gangs, ranging from relatively low use to levels of use that parallel those of men.

More recently there has been increased violence, substance use, and sexual relations among gang and nongang girls. For instance, nationwide studies reveal a steady increase beginning in 1992 in prevalence rates for use of drugs such as marijuana, heroin, inhalants, and cocaine among females (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 1996). A recent study conducted by the Office for National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) found that girls have caught up with boys in illicit drug and alcohol use. Moreover, there are more
girls who are new users of substances than boys (Office of National Drug Control Policy 2006). Similarly, the number of adult women and adolescents arrested and incarcerated is growing faster than that of men (U.S. Department of Justice 1995). These crimes tend to be nonviolent and nonproperty offenses for adult women and more related to their legal status as adolescents for young females (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1997; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995). However, female adolescent crimes are more likely than those of males to be motivated by interpersonal disputes rather than material gains—instrumental versus expressive violence (Loper and Cornell 1995).

This chapter will focus on the offending behavior (i.e., violence and substance use) and the sexual activity of Mexican American female gang members. The emphasis is on these girls as perpetrators, not necessarily as victims, which will be addressed in Chapter 6. Researchers argue that engaging in these antisocial behaviors is a means by which girls prove their worth to the gang. As Edwardo Portillos states, “Notions of protecting your homeboys, not backing down from a fight, and enacting revenge against those who have challenged you become the ideals of the marginalized Chicana and Mexicana gang members … [who] positively sanction these ideals” (1999). John Hagedorn and Mary Devitt found that girls may actually fight more than male gang members, but they fight differently, with fewer weapons and lethal consequences (1999). He found that those who most loved to fight had a less male-centered outlook, and those who fought less had more traditional ideals of gender. As David Curry states, discussion of girls’ involvement with gangs has tended to go to one extreme or the other (1998). Girls are either portrayed as victims of injury or have been seen as “liberated,” degendered gangbangers. Many studies emphasize how gender inequality and patriarchy shape female violence and other criminal behaviors within a street gang culture (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991; Miller 1998). They use these experiences to help construct an oppositional femininity. This chapter examines young women’s participation in delinquency, violence, sex, and substance use within the context of a Mexican American gang subculture.

High Rates of Delinquency and Violence

Given the existing literature it is not surprising that girls involved in this study were involved in a diverse array of delinquent activities. Table 5.1 provides the prevalence of self-reported delinquency for lifetime and previous-month involvement. The girls were asked if they had ever participated in these activities during the two indicated timeframes. The activities were identified as ranging from minor offenses to more serious