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Social Antecedents to Adolescent Gang Membership

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Keyword List

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Abstract

Identifying and addressing social antecedents to adolescent gang membership is important to gain understanding and awareness in order to develop prevention and intervention methods. In order for these methods to succeed there is a need to address a range of risk factors outlined by a social system's internal and external elements in relation to the boundary of male youth 12-25 years old. Through the State/Process Dynamic Model of male youth 12-25 years old becoming gang members, the social constructs become processes that may explain why adolescents have a proclivity to gang membership. Through the internal and external processes: individual, family, school, peers, and neighborhood and community; an adolescent's delinquency and subsequent gang membership stems from a combination of these factors that varies from child-to-child. No single risk factor is sufficient to explain why some youth become chronic delinquents that lead to gang membership. Research and study of gang phenomenon is vital in order to develop and implement prevention strategies so an adolescent's life can pay significant dividends by reducing crime rates and decreasing crime-related expenditures of tax dollars, especially when it can aid youth to avoid the consequence of gang life and increase their chances of leading law-abiding and productive lives.

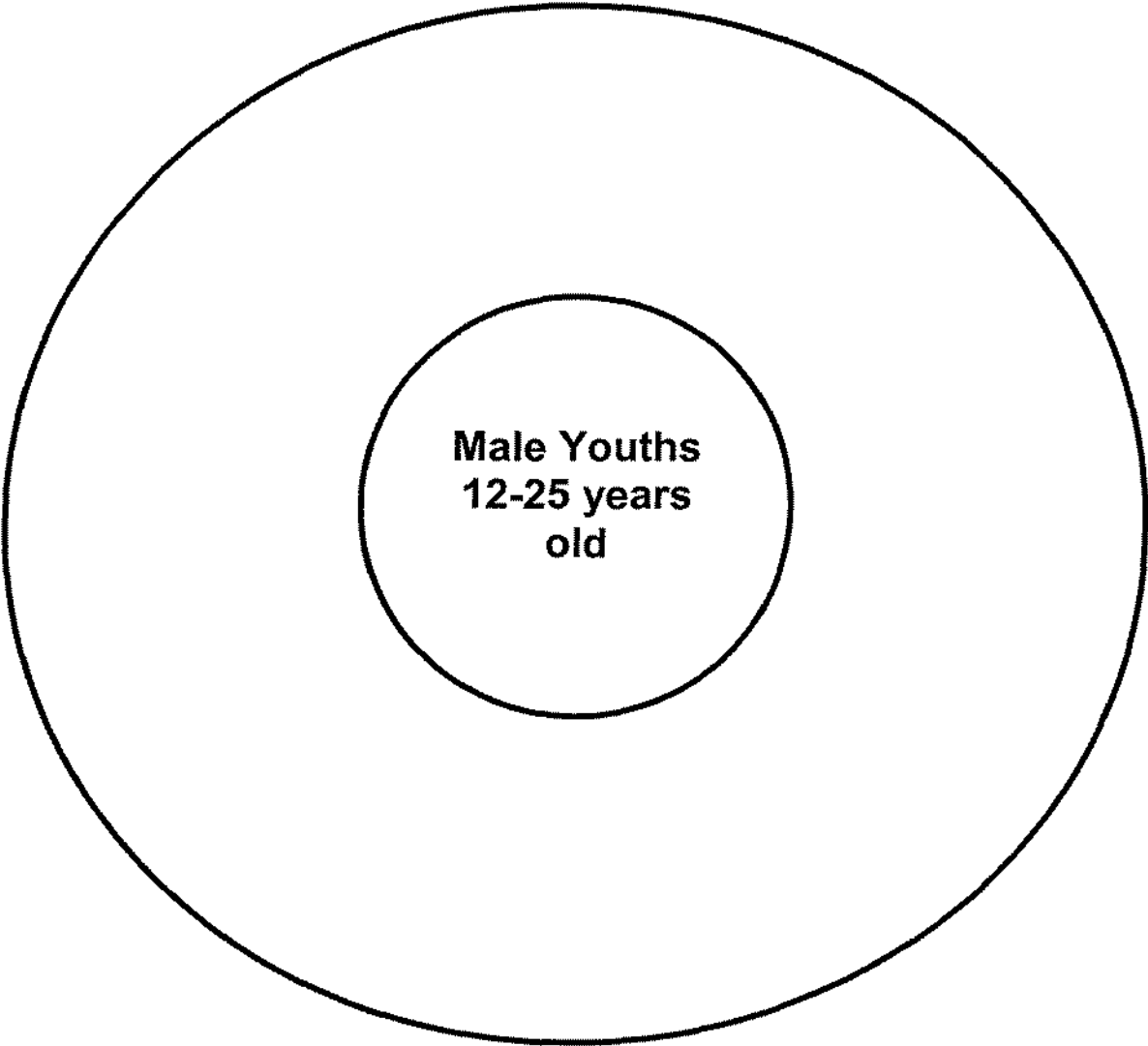
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Introduction

Many of America's rural, suburban and inner cities all struggle with violence, victimization, alcohol and drug abuse, and fear. At the center of this matrix are adolescents that have embarked upon a dangerous and deadly path called the gang. Many adolescents find it difficult to resist joining and becoming gang members. Identifying social antecedents to gang membership could help explain why youth join gangs and aid in the development and implementation of intervention and prevention methods to prevent youth from joining.

My research deals with examining the high-risk factors that predisposes at-risk male youth ages 12-25 years old to gang membership. My social system's relationship content areas of social and environmental characteristics delve within social constructs such as individual, peer associations, family, school, and neighborhoods and communities. The element of my social system is male youth 12-25 years old (see figure 1). My social system's boundary examines male youth associated with high-risk precursors that may have a higher proclivity to gang membership that may motivate or push adolescents to become gang members. While the issue of youth gangs has been the topic of a great deal of current and prior research since the rapid growth of juvenile gangs in the early 1980s, male youth ages 12-25 years old are at greater risk to gang membership. Through the internal and external relationships, a child's delinquency and subsequent gang membership stems from a combination of these factors that varies from child-to-child. No single risk factor is sufficient to explain why some youth become chronic delinquents that lead to gang membership.

Social System: Youth Gangs



Elements: Male youths 12-25 years old

System Boundary: Male youth associated with high risk factors that have a high proclivity to gang membership

Relationships:

Internal: Individual, Family

External: School, Peer Associations, Neighborhood/Community

Figure 1: Social Systems Model for Proclivity of Male Youth to Gang Membership

Moreover, the social antecedents identified, as precursors to gang membership existed in a youth's environment and the more elements, the likelihood increased that the individual would join a gang (Hill, Lui, and Hawkins 2001).

Before research presented in this paper is discussed and cited, there is a necessity for a systematic definition of adolescent gangs in order to identify and solidify precursors to adolescent gang membership comprehensively. Beth Bjerregaard's (2002) study explores the organization and structure of gangs, establishing through research, a defined set of elements that "encompass the symbolic aspects of the gang" (p. 36). Gangs meet as a group, have regular meetings, utilize a hierarchy of leaders, and acquire symbolic aspects of self-labeling and being known by that specific name. A gang's identity is recognizable by external symbols such as special clothing and/or colors and a gang is defined by the group's involvement in criminal activities that connect within a specific territory or turf. Research in a conducted survey queried criminal justice and youth service agencies asking them about their definitions of the term gang and found the overwhelming elemental component to be a group's engagement in illegal activities (Katz 2003).

Having established the defining elemental components of what constitutes as a gang, unless otherwise noted, the terms gang, gangs, or gang membership refers to youth gangs consisting of male youth 12-25 years old.

Methods

The data for this study are derived from secondary research through various articles and bulletins. The sites for data collection were targeted because of their extensive involvement in adolescent gangs and high-risk factors to adolescent gang

membership. Articles were comprised from academic and peer reviewed journals and through the Internet. Journals were researched from San Diego State Library through databases such as Sociofile, EBSCOhost, and Proquest. Internet articles were located from Google, a search engine, using key words to locate useful data.

Results

Who joins gangs, and why? There are certain factors that predispose some similarly at-risk male youths to join gangs. While no single variable is sufficient to explain a male youth's decision to join a gang, the research literature addressing the issues of gangs and gang information delves with social constructs and is easy to grasp by referring to the State/Process Dynamic Model (see figure 2). It is imperative to learn why adolescent males join gangs, as an informed understanding of the dynamics can aid in developing prevention strategies.

Many of the factors found to be predictive of gang membership typify the types of strain that adolescent male youth may feel (Eitle and Turner 2003). Through socialization, individuals who are detached from society's culturally legitimized social norms may exhibit deviant behavior, while others develop a moral conscience becoming integrated and conform to mainstream society. For male adolescents, social institutions such as family and school are the primary associations of socialization, and failure to integrate with them increases the prospect for delinquency (Dukes and Stein 2003). Data reveal, "Urban and rural areas are subject to gang membership when adolescents experience strain, lack of bonding to social institutions, and become increasingly involved with other delinquent adolescents who identified themselves as gang members" (Dukes and Stein 2003:419).

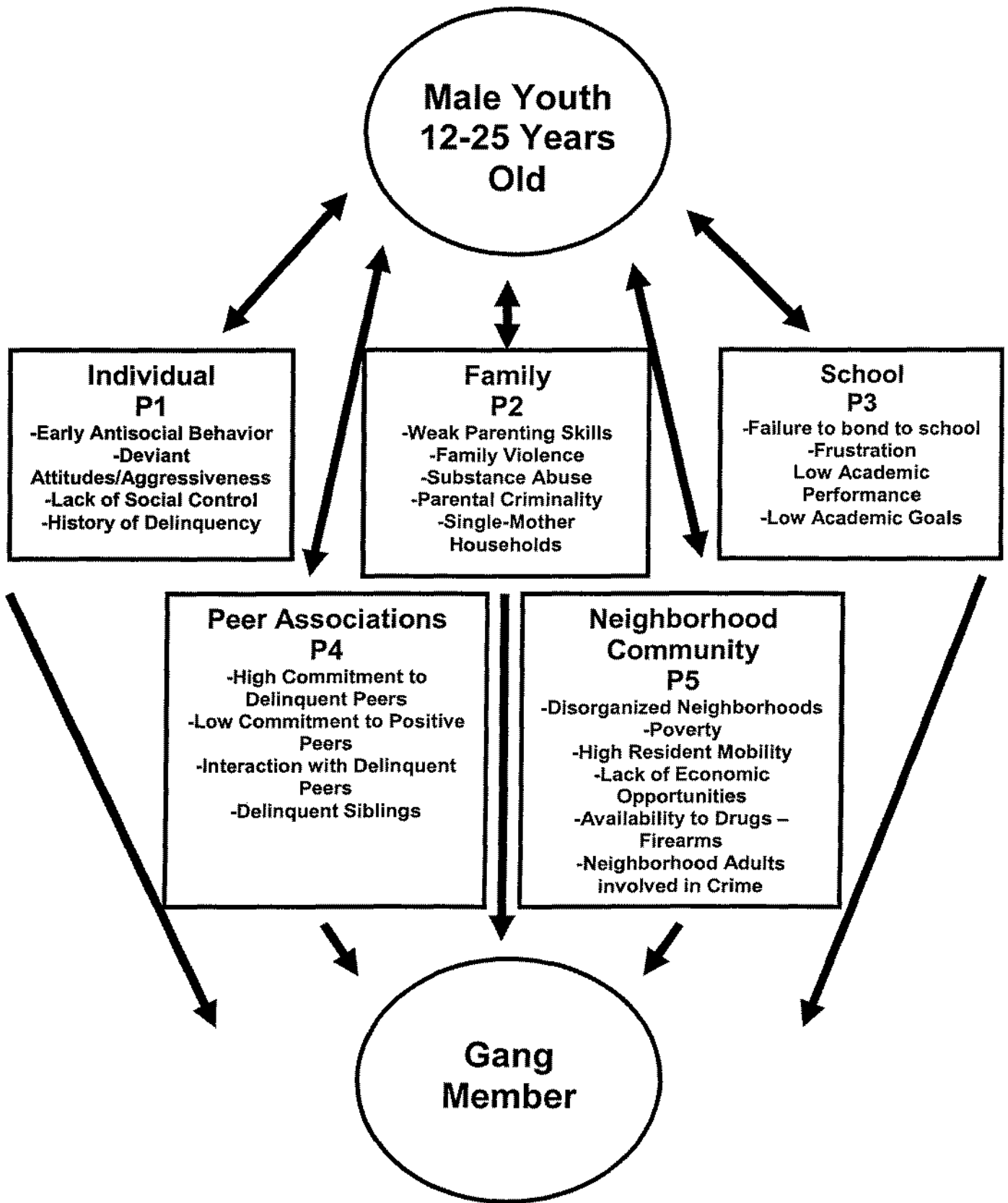


Figure 2: State/Process Dynamic Model of Male Youth 12-25 Years Old becoming Gang Members

Through a survey conducted, contained measured characteristics of social background such as age, grade, gender, and ethnic background, with age and grade distributions being similar across all four groups, results show gang members are of predominantly minority status and male (see figure 3). In addition, the mean age adolescent male youth are self-identified as gang members is "15 year old at 20.5 percent" (Dukes and Stein 2003:422). Moreover, data showed no difference between rural and urban adolescent well-being and found that rural adolescents had a greater problem bonding with social institutions than urban adolescents. The emergence of rural gangs is not the result of urban gang migration, instead deriving locally (Esbensen 2000). Increase of male youth gangs emerging in rural areas and cities without previous gang problems is cause for concern. Regardless of rural, suburban, and inner cities, (see figure 4), social indicators show the spread of gangs has gone beyond the central cities in the 1980s and 1990s. Data raises researchers' interest to seek questions whether newer gangs are forming in the cities, small towns, and suburban and rural areas, or if gangs are broadening their territories and altering traditional gang dynamics (Howell, Egley, and Gleason:2002). Data reveal that "urban and rural areas are subject to gang membership when adolescents experience strain, lack of bonding to social institutions, and become increasingly involved with other delinquent adolescents who identified themselves as gang members" (Dukes and Stein 2003:419). This finding is similar to urban adolescents.

Social antecedents to gang membership can be categorized to a young child's

Figure 3: Selected Demographic Characteristics of Respondents by Gang Membership and Gender

TABLE 1
Selected Demographic Characteristics of Respondents by Gang Membership
Age and Gender

	<i>Gang Members</i>		<i>Nongang Members</i>	
	<i>Female (n = 625)</i> <i>M = 14.8 years</i>	<i>Male (n = 1,044)</i> <i>M = 15.0 years</i>	<i>Female (n = 745)</i> <i>M = 14.7 years</i>	<i>Male (n = 997)</i> <i>M = 14.8 years</i>
Age (%)				
11 or younger	1.2	2.6	1.2	1.7
12	6.6	4.9	11.3	7.5
13	17.9	14.3	18.1	19.3
14	20.5	18.8	15.7	15.3
15	19.3	20.5	18.3	19.3
16	17.4	15.2	17.0	16.3
18 or older	6.0	10.6	6.6	7.8
Grade (%)				
7	15.2	14.6	17.3	18.0
8	22.2	17.2	16.0	16.1
9	20.5	20.5	17.4	19.1
10	17.0	16.2	18.0	16.5
11	15.5	17.6	16.6	17.1
12	9.6	13.9	14.6	13.1
Ethnicity (%)				
American Indian	3.7	5.1	3.4	3.1
African American	9.4	11.9	7.2	7.5
Hispanic	21.3	17.3	8.6	6.6
Asian-Pacific	3.8	4.0	4.4	4.0
White	33.3	40.8	61.1	64.1
Mixed	25.9	18.8	14.0	12.3
Unknown	2.6	2.0	1.3	2.0
Rural district (%)	12.6	14.7	17.0	17.5

Source:

Dukes, Richard L. and Judith A. Stein. 2003. "Gender and Gang Membership: A Contrast of Rural and Urban Youth on Attitudes and Behavior." *Youth & Society* 34(4):442.

Figure 4: Social Indicator – Onset of Gang Problem by Area Type, 1996 Survey

Table 2: Year of Gang Problem Onset, by Area Type, 1996 Survey

Area Type*	Percentage of Jurisdictions Reporting Onset of Gang Problems						All Periods
	Before 1981	1981-85	1986-90	1991-92	1993-94	1995-96	
Larger city (n=669)	9	8	38	20	18	6	100
Smaller city (n=79)	5	3	20	22	32	19	100
Suburban county (n=265)	6	6	28	20	32	9	100
Rural county (n=108)	2	1	16	17	46	19	100

Note: Percentages within each population size category may not total 100 because of rounding.

*Larger cities are those with populations of 25,000 or more. Smaller cities are those with populations between 2,500 and 24,999.

Source:

Howell, James C., Arlen Egley, Jr., and Debra K. Gleason. 2002. "Modern-Day Youth Gangs." *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* NCJ 191524 June. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile and Delinquency Prevention. p. 7 Retrieved September 17, 2003 (<http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/191524>).

exposure to delinquency and a adolescent male's association to antisocial behaviors early in life, deviant attitudes and/or aggressiveness, lack of social control, and a history of delinquency may lead to early juvenile offending, increasing as the number of risk factors domains increases (Wasserman, Keenan, Tremblay, Coie, Herrenkohl, Loeber, and Petechuk 2003). "An individual's early antisocial behavior may be the best predictor to later delinquency in adolescents" (Wasserman et al. 2003:2). An individual seeks gang membership as a means to make money, to enhance his own prestige or status among peers, to experience the thrill, and the excitement of committing illegal acts and getting away with it. Prior research conducted concluded that "youth referred to juvenile court for their first delinquent offense before age 12 are far more likely to become chronic offenders than youth first referred to court at a later age" (Wasserman et al. 2003:3).

Family risk factors tend to include weak parenting skills considered a powerful predictor of early antisocial behavior among male adolescents. "Inadequate child-rearing, disorganized family structure and child maltreatment are associated with early on-set delinquency" (Wasserman et al 2003:5). Young children whose family environment consists of parent-child conflicts, low levels of monitoring, and high levels of punishment increase the risk in delinquency. Abused, maltreated, and neglected children often display antisocial behaviors and begin to offend more frequently and at earlier ages. Family violence, where children are witness physical and verbal spouse abuse has been linked to increased child behavior problems, especially for boys and younger children (Wasserman et al 2003). Family that perpetuate negative and violent stimuli such as older family gang members who exhibit levels of family conflict and

condone serious and violent acts increase children or sibling antisocial behaviors and establish these behaviors as the norm. Single-families where mothers are the head of households have children who are living with fewer economic resources. Moreover, single mothers report more mental health problems and have higher residential mobility and fewer resources to monitor their children activities and whereabouts. (Wasserman et al. 2003). These factors contribute to increased levels of early childhood behavior problems that later may push and/or motivate male adolescents to gang membership.

School and a child with antisocial behaviors may fail to bond with other positive role models such as teachers and/or positive peer associations. Poor academic performance and frustration can lead to an adolescent male's disenfranchisement of the educational system. Adolescent males with weak bonds such as low commitment to school, low educational aspirations, and poor motivation are at risk for general offending and delinquency (Wasserman et al. 2003).

Associating with delinquent peers is a contributing factor to delinquency and one of the strongest predictors of delinquency that researchers have identified (Battin, Thornberry, Hawkins, and Krohn 1998). The Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP) is a longitudinal study guided by Catalano and Hawkins Social Development Model, which incorporates both risk and protective factors together, accentuating positive and antisocial development. A sample of urban youth of diverse races (African-Americans, European-Americans, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, and other ethnic groups), using the same group of boys since they entered the fifth grade was studied from the time they were 13-to-15 years of age. Almost half of the youth came from

families with yearly incomes reporting a maximum income under \$20,000 per year (Battin et al. 2003). In addition, the youth were enrolled in the National School Lunch/School Breakfast Program at some point in the fifth through seventh grades, indicating they came from families in poverty (Battin et al. 1998). One study conducted, (see figure 5), revealed gang presence varied significantly with household income and at the "lowest income level (less than \$7,500), the largest percentage (47 percent) of students reported gangs in their schools" (Howell and Lynch 2000:4). Peer association with deviant peers is related to increase co-offending for adolescent males with antisocial behaviors. Deviant peer associations influence juveniles who already have some history of delinquent behavior to increase the severity or frequency of their offending (Wasserman et al. 2003). Siblings who also committed delinquent acts at a high rate may reinforce antisocial behavior in a younger sibling, especially when there is a close relationship (Wasserman et al. 2003). Deviant peer associations can be found in gangs, as they provide a ready source of co offenders. The Rochester Youth Development Study, the Denver Youth Survey, and the Seattle Social Development Project have all shown that gangs appear to exert a considerable amount of influence on the delinquent behavior of individual members (Wasserman et al. 2003). Gang membership has a strong relationship to self-reported violence, and may be considered a social antecedent for adolescent males to remain in a gang afterwards.

Disorganized neighborhoods and community where poverty is prevalent to adolescent gang membership exposing children to risk factors and youth offending.

Figure 5: Percentage of Students Reporting Gang Presence in School, by Household Income

Table 6: Percentage of Students Reporting Gang Presence in School, by Household Income

Household Income	Gang Presence*	
	Yes	No
Less than \$7,500 (n=573)	47%	53%
\$7,500 to 12,499 (n=655)	42	58
\$12,500 to 49,999 (n=5,912)	37	63
\$50,000 or more (n=2,814)	36	64
Total (n=9,954)	37	63

*Using a composite measure of gang presence derived from student responses to the questions: (1) Are there any street gangs at your school? (2) Do any of the students at your school belong to a street gang? And (3) What about gangs that don't have members attending your school ... have any of those gangs come around your school in the past 6 months?

Note: n=number of respondents.

Source:

Howell, James C. and James P. Lynch. 2000. "Youth Gangs in Schools." *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* NCJ 183015 August. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. Office of Juvenile and Delinquency Prevention. p. 5
Retrieved October 23, 2003 (<http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/183015.pdf>).

Common in neighborhoods of decay, poor, disadvantaged children raised in disorganized families are exposed to high levels of weak social controls networks that allow criminal activity to take place and may even be unnoticed. Prior study reveals in communities where disorganized neighborhoods have a high concentration of poverty leads residents to disregard intervention practices when children are engaging in antisocial/unlawful acts that increase the likelihood of violence in neighborhoods (Wasserman et al. 2003). Moreover, disorganized neighborhoods have a higher prevalence of serious and violent offenders such as gangs that entice adolescents into crime. According to James C. Howell (1998), "A recent national law enforcement survey of the ethnicity of gang members is 48 percent African-American, 43 percent Hispanic, 5 percent white, and 4 percent Asian" (p. 2). The disproportionate representation of minority group members is not because of their race and ethnicity, but because these groups are prominent in the urban lower class neighborhoods. A major source of variation in gang membership is found in relationships between gang and community. Social antecedents to gang membership correlate to the bonding that occurs between gang members and their community. Gangs need a safe haven, youth gang members are the children of the residents, and the gangs often provide protection for residents. Many residents, such as family members of youth gang members identify with gangs, because of their own current and/or prior involvement in gangs and the fear of too much policing in their neighborhood (Howell 1998).

Another factor is the low socio-economic level of gang members and their families. The changing economy has reduced the demand for low-skilled workers in the service-oriented job market, the desire and frustration to achieve upward mobility and

the barriers to access to the labor market has excluded many of the underclass male youth to rely on other economic alternatives. Permanently excluded from participating in the mainstream labor market, gang members seek moneymaking ventures through serious and violent crime, drug trafficking, and other profitable street crimes (Howell 1998). Importantly, social, economic, and cultural forces are social antecedents as adolescent male youth have few choices and veer in the direction of gangs. Many youth have no choice but to join a gang, especially when they live in disorganized neighborhoods where crime is rampant and people feel unsafe. The breakdown in social control, where the adolescent male has no conscience to his ecological environment; therefore lacks community solidarity, displays deviant behaviors, and engages with other peers who are involved in criminal activities. From the perspective of survive or become the victim, adolescent males learn to adapt to the dangers in their disadvantaged neighborhoods and develop a range of social identities to manage the threats and demands by acquiring the 'code of the street' of survival that derives from violence (Stewart, Simons, and Conger 2002). This research has established that the 'code of the streets' becomes the epidemic model illustrated in such a manner that peers influence one another's behavior and they assume that "like begets like" (Stewart et al. 2002). Gang members maintain and claim their turf or neighborhood and male youth who witness high rates of community violence are more likely to accept and exhibit antisocial behavior and than youth who have witnessed little or no violence. Disorganized neighborhoods have increased readily available drugs, guns, transitory population, high crime rate, and an acceptance of violence as part of mainstream culture (Stewart et al. 2002).

Conclusion

After extensive research, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of adolescent male youth gang members and the social antecedents to adolescent male gang membership is an issue of mounting concern. Early on in a child's life, the most important risks stem from internal elements such as individual and family factors. As the male youth grows older and becomes integrated into society, external new risk factors related to peer influences, school, and neighborhood and community begin to play a larger role. The popular image of youth gangs time them directly to drugs and violent crime as they continually recruit younger youth to join gangs and involve them in criminal and violent acts. Gangs have been constant to social antecedents; internal and external processes already discussed (Howell, Egley, and Gleason 2002). A number of prior gang studies offer evidence that gang involvement increases the likelihood of self-reported violence during adolescence (Howell et al. 2002). As male gang members mature, the criminal involvement of their members grows more serious and violent suggesting bonding of individual members to their gangs. Research and study support findings that the presence of gangs shows a strong correlation to the presence of both guns and drugs in schools (Howell and Lynch 2000). Initial internal and external processes of individual, family, peers, school, and neighborhoods and community have strong relationships to an individual and gang membership and criminal involvement in serious and violent activities is the cohesive element that keeps gangs together. Internal and external elements promote criminal activities among adolescents and do not provide adequate socialization that can lead to early onset of offending that persist

throughout life like gang membership (Wasserman, Keenan, Tremblay, Coie, Herrenkohl, Loeber, and Petechuk 2003).

Kevin A. Yoder, Les B. Whitbeck, and Dan R. Hoyt (2003) conducted research and studied another venue of gang proliferation among the homeless and runaways - the invisible population of youth. The article indicated that youth gangs are a prevalent phenomenon in the United States consisting of the homeless and runaway youth, often invisible, are ubiquitous. Living on the streets, homeless and runaway male youth often turn to gangs as a family substitute; seeking peer associations to identify with, gain companionship, protection, and criminal opportunities that aid in surviving the streets.

Additional research and study is required to understand better the protective factors that mitigate the effects of risk exposures. The larger the number of risk factors to which an individual is exposed, the greater the probability that the individual will engage in violent behavior, common in gangs. The importance of preventive measures, as researched in an article by J. David Hawkins, Todd I. Herrenkohl, David P Farrington, Devon Brewer, Richard F. Catalano, Tracy W. Harachi, and Lyn Cothorn (2000) stated "If the risk factors can be decreased and protective factors enhanced by preventive action, then the likelihood of violence should be reduced" (p.1). In addition, according to Terence P. Thornberry and James H. Burch II research study, "If gang members do not contribute disproportionately to the amount of delinquency in society, they would be responsible for about one-third of the delinquent acts" (p. 2). Gang members do a share of delinquencies proportionate to the population. This and other research studies give credence to continue research and study in order to establish intervention/prevention strategies to marginalize adolescent male youth gangs.

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Appendix

The author is a part-time student at San Diego State University. She is earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology specializing in Social Problems. She works full-time job as a program assistant for the Safe Schools Unit of the San Diego County Office of Education, Superintendent of Schools. Social antecedents to adolescent gang membership is an interest to her since she works with violence prevention/intervention strategies that indirectly help potentially high-risk students who are often gang members, have affiliation with gangs, or have a proclivity to the predictors of gang membership.