

THE SEARCH FOR FAMILY: ADOLESCENT MALES' MOTIVES FOR JOINING GANGS

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ABSTRACT

The majority of research on adolescent gangs has focused on delineating the correlates of gang membership. This research provides important insight into who joins gangs; however, it tells us little about why adolescents join gangs. The present endeavor utilized a free response survey to investigate the motives or reasons that adolescent males have for initially entering a gang. Participants were recruited from a residential treatment facility for adolescent male wards of the state of Michigan. The reasons most cited for joining a gang included 1) gain a second or surrogate family, 2) power, 3) acceptance, and 4) excitement/fun. Contrary to expectations, few participants stated that peer pressure or influence played a role in their decision to join a gang; rather, a desire for a close, familial relationship and for acceptance from others (specifically, other gang members) seemed to be the primary reasons these young men entered gangs.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of adolescents are joining gangs and engaging in gang-related activities, at the same time that the average age of gang members is decreasing (Scheidlinger 1994). Consequently, the media and psychological community have devoted more and more attention to this topic. The majority of research in this area has focused on delineating the correlates of gang membership, including such individual difference variables as learning disabilities and alcohol abuse (Zagar, Arbit, Sylvies, Busch, Hughes 1990), such demographic variables as socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Calhoun, Jurgens, Chen 1993; Lyon, Henggeler, Hall 1992), and such family environmental variables as single-parent families, domestic violence, and inadequate parenting (Adler, Ovando, Hocevar 1984; Belitz, Valdez 1994). This research provides important insight into who joins gangs; however, it tells us little about why individuals join gangs.

The present endeavor utilized a free response survey to investigate the motives or reasons that adolescent males have for initially entering a gang. Adolescence has been described as a developmental stage in which youngsters crave peer acceptance (Esman 1985; Rose, Edleson 1988) and seek out peers as they explore and solidify their identities (for discussion, see Moss 1992), and previous research indicates that peer pressure is associated with adolescents' sexual decision making and use of drugs and alcohol (Cullari, Mikus 1990; Kozicki 1986). Consequently, we expected that our participants would cite peer influence or pressure as an important reason for gang membership. In addition, some researchers have noted that the street gang may function as a replacement or surrogate family

for many youths. For example, Morales (1992) writes that "the [male] gang member receives affection, understanding recognition, loyalty, and emotional and physical protection" from his gang. We therefore expected that our participants would cite their desire to find a surrogate family as an important reason for joining a gang.

METHOD AND RESULTS

Ten adolescent males (average age = 16.2 years, 40% Caucasian, 40% African American, 20% Hispanic) enrolled at Starr Commonwealth School (a residential treatment facility for adolescent male wards of the state of Michigan) volunteered to participate in this study. All were gang members prior to their entrance into Starr Commonwealth. Participants were surveyed individually, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and asked to write down all of the reasons they joined their respective gangs when they were out in the community.

Two undergraduate raters who were blind to hypotheses examined participants' free responses and created a list of motives/reasons. Two additional raters, also blind to hypotheses, then examined each free response for the presence/absence of the aforementioned motives. The reasons cited by participants for joining a gang were: 1) To gain a second or surrogate family (70%), 2) need for power (60%), 3) to feel acceptance (40%), 4) to experience excitement/fun (40%), 5) to gain the opportunity to commit criminal, violent, and/or antisocial acts (e.g., drug use, robbery, illegal weapons, murder) (40%), 6) because other family members belonged to that particular gang (30%), 7) for protection and security (30%), 8) because of environmental factors (e.g., moved into a gang-controlled

neighborhood) (20%), 9) for monetary reasons (20%), 10) because of peer pressure and peer involvement in gangs (20%), and 11) for revenge (20%).

None of the participants gave only one reason for his gang membership. For example, one 17 year-old male wrote the following rather poignant response to our question:

There are a lot of reasons I joined the gang. I did it partly for acceptance, protection, all my friends was in it. I think the biggest reason was cuz it goes with the territory. When you grow up in the hood its really messed up. I've seen two of my friends get killed right in front of me and I can name at least ten more that have gotten killed (not in front of me). Its like they'er there one minute the next they're gone. I never even thought I would live to be 17 but I did and thank the lord everyday. Its like when you grow up with nothin you feel you are nothin. One of my friends that got killed in front of me was killed by a gang member so I joined the rival gang to get revenge. Another reason is I grow up without any roll modle so I turned to the streets to look up to. Thats about it. You may not understand why we join gangs cuz alot of people tell me they don't and I try to exsplan but can't. You never will understand unles you grow up in the hood.

Contrary to expectations, few participants stated that peer pressure or influence played a major role in their decision to join a gang; rather, a desire for a close, familial relationship and for acceptance from others (specifically, other gang members) seemed to be the overwhelming reasons these young men entered gangs. For example:

I joined a gang because I wanted to have another family. And because they were all cool with each other. And another reason why because I wanted to be accepted. And they always looked out for me when I needed them. [male, 15]

I believed they could be my 2nd family and that they would always be with me threw thick and thin. And for acceptance. My mom was always gone and my dad was in prison, and the gangmembers practically raised me. [male, 15]

Reasons why I joined a gang was because I moved into a neighborhood where there were gangs. I was new. I didn't know anybody. I wanted to be known by somebody around my

block. So I talked to some people and they wanted me to join there gang. I had to get beat in by gang members. I got a nickname. When I was in a gang people told me I was stupid and some people said I was crazy but I wanted to be accepted and have friends. Another reason I joined a gang because my family never was there my mom worked all day. My stepdad would be at a bar. So I joined a gang because I wanted to be accepted by someone and have people know me. [male, 16]

I joined my gang when I was 11 years old and my dad was in it and I was suppose to carry out our gang name... I was safe and no one can mess with me. I had everything I wanted - girls money guns. And I had power and when my own family wouldn't help me the gang could and it was like another family to me and I had a lot of trouble with people and my family gang help me. [male, 16]

There were many reasons why I joined the [gang name]. One of the most important reasons is that I lived alone with my father and our relationship had deteriorated to the point where I needed a "surrogate family." In the gang I had that family. I had sisters, brothers, even people who told me what to do. I also loved the feeling of power and importance. My last reason was because of the reputation I got. I was feared in my school because of me being in a gang. Even though I wasn't tough, I could demand respect because of carrying a gun and having the backup of over a hundred people. [male, 17]

CONCLUSION

In recent years, gang activity and community violence have presented an increasing threat to the physical and emotional well-being of many adolescents and young adults (Rogers 1993). Little agreement exists about the types of intervention strategies that should be used to reduce gang violence (Vigil 1980). Knowledge about how gang members' needs are met by gang participation may aid in the design and implementation of successful intervention programs and may result in more effective treatment by mental health professionals and law enforcement officials who have contact with gang members.

This study examined the reasons that male adolescents have for initially joining a gang. Despite our small sample size, the results suggest that interpersonal factors (e.g., need for acceptance by others, to form close family relationships) play an important role in

influencing adolescents' decisions to join gangs. A desire for power, excitement, and fun also seems important, as does the opportunity to engage in antisocial, violent, and/or criminal acts. However, contrary to the image of the antisocial gang culture that is commonly endorsed by the media, gang membership is social rather than antisocial—that is, the initial decision to enter a gang appears to stem from a wish to form relationships and to gain a sense of belonging.

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