

Gang Violence in Hampton Roads: Findings from a Longitudinal Research Project on Youth Offending and Victimization

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Research Findings

- The research uses comparative survey data gathered from 1500 African American youth from 11 to 18 years of age in Hampton Roads.
- As with previous studies, results show that many of the youth gang offenders have been victims of violence in the home and in the community.
- The survey data collected from children and adolescents over an extended period of time helps to explain gang related delinquency development as a function of exposure to violence and maladaptive coping (i.e., wishful thinking and avoidance) as well as address intervention and service needs.
- We have found that younger participants (11 to 12 year old children) rating high on *behavior impulsivity* are seven times more likely to report delinquent behavior, serving as the strongest predictor of delinquency prior to age 13, as with previous research.

Research Findings

- As with previous findings, the main reasons for joining gangs and becoming actively involved in gang related delinquency within this sample are friendship (acceptance from a delinquent peer group), protection (to safeguard drug exchanges and avenge fights) and excitement (thrill seeking).
- Regarding violent delinquency, the study also examines primary factors including violence related activities among minority youth.
- Results show that a number of external factors (previous victimization, poverty, unemployment of parent/guardian, incarceration of a family member) have enabled delinquent acts as well as other pertinent dispositional variables including *academic performance problems, relational differences within the home, peer rejection and harassment, and low self esteem/reduced self regard*.
- Findings support Walter Miller's (1958, Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Juvenile Delinquency) 6 focal concerns of the youth gang regarding the values that they hold in opposition to conventional society since ratings appear higher on these measures:
 - Trouble
 - Toughness
 - Smartness
 - Excitement
 - Fate
 - Autonomy

Theoretical Framework

- Support is also found for Travis Hirschi's (2007, Causes of Delinquency) concept of the social bond. When these ties are weakened/broken, juveniles are free to deviate from the bonds of:
- *Attachment to parents, school, religion, and positive peers*
- *Commitment to conventional lines of action*
- *Involvement in activities that promote prosocial behavior*
- *Belief in the laws and regulations of society*
- This suggests that gangs are often formed when the elements of these bonds are impaired, and deviance becomes legitimated.

Theoretical Framework

- Results also show that youth rated high on the measures from Sykes' and Matza (1957, Techniques of Neutralization) as they deny responsibility for their actions, deny causing injury to their victims, and deny that victims existed during their attack. This makes it more difficult for them to accept the responsibility of their actions and to show remorse for their behavior.
- The high levels of fatalism and desensitization displayed in the sample also suggest that they are experiencing a numbing effect of their actions, further increasing the impact of what we deem as “senseless” acts of violence among those who are very young.

Characteristics of the Gang

- As with previous work, the juveniles who report repeated gang activity are between the ages of 14 and 18.
- They are predominately male.
- They are typically younger when initiation takes place (11-13).
- They are not actively involved in positive school and community activities.
- Those with parents/guardians who have been arrested or placed in jail within the past six months are at a greater risk of gang involvement as are those who have been in detention centers.
- Intensity of behavior escalates from property related crimes, drug sales, threats with weapons, and fights with other gang members over time.

Characteristics of the Gang

- They are residing within the single parent household. Mother-only is the dominant structure, followed by father-only, family member and foster care placement.
- Although fewer in number compared to boys, girls in gangs report greater physical and sexual abuse in the home and in the presence of maternal incarceration, they are more likely to report emotional abuse.
- From 11-13% of the girls and 13-15% of the boys have engaged in risky sexual behavior, and in some cases, leading to parenting at an early age.

Recommendations

- Collaboration of schools, communities, law enforcement, and families from a holistic perspective is needed to guarantee that organizations reflect valuing, supporting, and investing (issues of respect and self worth are critical).
- Community based participatory research should inform all outreach services to youth and their families to reduce the disproportionate rates of youth gun and gang violence.
- Communities need to propose exact programs that meet the necessities and enhance inherent strengths and capitals of the family (such as social support and problem focused activities as means of positive, active coping).

Recommendations

- Providing youth with opportunities and outlets to engage in positive behaviors to highlight their strengths, and promoting healthy routines while teaching positive arrangements of communication must be emphasized.
- Cultivating relationships between young children and adolescents and caring mentors to guide and support them through positive activities such as community service learning, tutoring, sports, and cultural events must be highlighted.
- Dismantling the structural barriers that promote violence must occur. Many families are faced with structural violence such as poverty, underemployment and lower education that leave them powerless to change the immediate arrangement of their household to provide safer environments. Larger, macro-level changes must follow to help these families cope with adverse situations, including the increased likelihood of their children becoming gang members.

Select Publications

[Treatment programs for incarcerated women and mother–child communication](#)

ZT McGee, AN Gilbert

Criminal Justice Studies 23 (4), 337-345

[Delinquent behavior, violent victimization, and coping strategies among Latino adolescents](#)

ZT McGee, A Barber, E Joseph, J Dudley, R Howell

Journal of offender rehabilitation 42 (3), 41-56

[Community violence and adolescent development an examination of risk and protective factors among African American youth](#)

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Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice 19 (3), 293-314

[Impact of Violence on Problem Behavior Among Adolescents Risk Factors Among an Urban Sample](#)

ZT McGee, SR Baker

Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice 18 (1), 74-93

[Urban stress and mental health among African-American youth: assessing the link between exposure to violence, problem behavior, and coping strategies.](#)

ZT McGee, BL Davis, T Brisbane, N Collins, T Nuriddin, S Irving, ...

Journal of cultural diversity 8 (3), 94-104

[Patterns of violent behavior and victimization among African American youth](#)

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Journal of Offender Rehabilitation 30 (1-2), 47-64