

THE EFFECTS OF JOINING AND LEAVING A GANG ON DELINQUENT OFFENDING

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March 12, 2010

Preliminary draft. Please do not cite or distribute without permission.

Abstract

Research on the effects of gang membership on offending has been guided by Thornberry et al.'s (1993) framework of selection, facilitation and enhancement, which correspond to a "kinds of persons" explanation, a "kinds of groups" explanation, and a mix of the two. Krohn and Thornberry (2008) recently summarized the research in this area, concluding that evidence in favor of facilitation effects exceeded that of selection effects. Using a recent longitudinal survey of adjudicated youth, we assess the effect of both gang joining *and* gang leaving on offending. Contrary to the extant literature, propensity score matching techniques indicate large selection effects and very little evidence of a causal impact of either gang joining or gang leaving on offending. Methodological, conceptual, and empirical implications for the literature are discussed.

Keywords: gangs, desistance, crime, delinquency, propensity score matching

JEL codes: K14, K42, J29

Gangs pose a problem of a considerable magnitude for contemporary cities.

Approximately 25 percent of the homicides committed between 2002 and 2006 in the 100 largest U.S. cities were gang-related (Decker and Pyrooz, 2010). In Los Angeles and Chicago in 2004, over half of all homicides were gang-related (Egley and Ritz, 2006). Gangs also generate problems in community and school settings, increasing perceptions of disorder and fear (Howell, 2006; Katz, Webb, and Armstrong, 2003; Tita and Ridgeway, 2007). These problems extend to individuals, with evidence showing that gang membership induces increased criminal activity for individuals involved in the gang (Thornberry, 1998). Should this increased criminal activity lead to official sanctioning from the criminal justice system, additional negative consequences may follow (Huizinga and Henry, 2008).

Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte and Chard-Wierschem (1993) proposed three explanations for the relationship between gang membership and delinquency—selection, facilitation, and enhancement. The selection model is a “kinds of persons” explanation, suggesting that crime-prone youth select into gangs and that any increased delinquency should not be attributed to gang membership. This is consistent with a propensity or syndrome explanation of delinquency (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Jessor and Jessor, 1977; Newcomb and Bentler, 1988). The facilitation model is a “kinds of groups” explanation (Akers, 2009; Sutherland, 1947), suggesting that the increased delinquency of gang members is purely attributable to the influence of the gang, particularly group processes associated with gang membership. The enhancement model combines these themes. Thornberry and colleagues’ framework has attracted a great deal of attention and these explanatory themes have been tested employing a diverse set of methodologies (see Table 1). In a recent assessment of this literature, Krohn and Thornberry

(2008:147) concluded “there is a minor selection effect, a major facilitation effect, and no evidence consistent with a pure selection model.”

Despite the importance of these themes, a handful of limitations constrain the literature. First, since longitudinal data are required to examine these hypotheses, studies have been limited to select datasets. Second, less attention has been devoted to desistance from gang membership in spite of equally important implications (Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb, in press). Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, and Hawkins (1998:108, emphasis added) pointed out that “additional research is needed before, during, and *after* gang membership.” Third, most research to date has strictly attested to the *effect* of gang membership while largely ignoring the theoretical implications. Proponents of the selection model would argue that an enhancement effect is evidence of a “kinds of persons”—not groups—theme.

This paper addresses the above shortcomings using longitudinal data consisting of 1,354 high-risk youth in Philadelphia and Phoenix, followed for a five-year period beginning in 2000. We propose to answer the following two questions: First, does joining a gang lead to increased delinquency? While this has been answered in the affirmative by prior studies, a more rigorous approach to controlling for selection into gangs on a different sample is warranted. Second, does leaving a gang lead to reduced delinquency? This aims to identify important differences between effects of gang membership while in the gang versus after leaving the gang—an original contribution to this literature.

EXPLAINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GANG MEMBERSHIP AND DELINQUENCY

Thornberry et al. (1993) introduced three explanations for the effect of gang membership on delinquency: selection, facilitation, and enhancement. These explanations help identify