

A Seminar Paper

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Criminal Justice

Jordan M. Alcaraz

Year of Graduation—2025

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Reducing Gang Involvement Amongst Youth—Exploring Traits and Backgrounds of Gang
Members to Create Appropriate Intervention Strategies for At-Risk Youth

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Abstract

Youth involvement in gangs presents a significant challenge to public safety, individual development, and community well-being. While existing research highlights various contributing factors, a comprehensive understanding of the specific characteristics and backgrounds that predispose youth to gang affiliation remains a critical gap. This report investigates the socioeconomic, psychological, and environmental influences on youth gang involvement with the aim of creating more effective intervention strategies. Drawing upon existing literature and theoretical frameworks, this research explores the complex combination of factors that drive youth to participate in gangs. Key psychological traits such as low self-esteem, aggression, impulsivity, antisocial behaviors, and issues related to identity formation are examined, alongside environmental factors including adverse childhood experiences, familial criminality, poverty, and peer pressure. The study also analyzes prominent criminological theories including social learning, interactional, general strain, routine activities, and social disorganization theories, in explaining youth gang involvement. Furthermore, this paper evaluates existing intervention strategies and uses them to propose recommendations for future intervention strategies, expanding on community-based programs, family and parental involvement, school-based initiatives, cognitive-behavioral and skill building interventions, strengthening law enforcement and community partnerships, and addressing structural and socioeconomic barriers.

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Section I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Youth involvement in gangs poses a significant challenge to public safety, individual development, and community cohesion. With rising rates of gang membership among today's youth, it is crucial to understand the underlying factors that contribute to their engagement in gang activities. It has been found that a combination of socio-economic conditions, family dynamics, peer influence, and individual psychological traits can make at-risk youth more susceptible to joining gangs. However, there remains a considerable gap in identifying the specific characteristics and backgrounds that influence youth pathways into gangs.

This research aims to investigate the characteristics and circumstances of youth who become involved in gangs, specifically focusing on their socio-demographic information, psychological profiles, and environmental influences. By analyzing these factors, this report seeks to inform the development of effective intervention strategies to prevent gang involvement amongst at-risk youth. Current intervention programs tend to lack customized approaches that meet the diverse needs of different youth populations, leading to inadequate support for those at risk.

Ultimately, this study will contribute to the fields of criminal justice and youth development by providing valuable insights into the complexities surrounding gang involvement. Additionally, it aims to provide practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and community organizations to implement more effective intervention programs. By concentrating on the specific traits and backgrounds of gang members, the research aspires to deepen the

understanding of the issue and pave the way for reducing gang involvement amongst youth and other vulnerable groups.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the traits and backgrounds of past and current gang members to develop intervention strategies that can help at-risk youth resist gang involvement. By examining factors related to socio-demographic information, psychological profiles, and environmental influences, the study will identify specific elements that lead to gang-affiliation among at-risk adolescents. Through this examination, the study will formulate targeted intervention strategies that effectively address the distinct needs of various youth populations. The goal is to provide practical insights and recommendations that can guide the development of interventions intended to reduce gang involvement, thereby fostering positive youth development and enhancing community safety and cohesion.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for a range of stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, community organizations, and families affected by gang involvement. By highlighting the complex factors that contribute to youth gang involvement, the study enhances understanding within the fields of criminal justice and youth development. The findings will underscore the importance of evidence-based intervention programs that account for the unique backgrounds and needs of at-risk youth, which improves the effectiveness of existing strategies. Furthermore, the study aims to inform policy decisions and resource allocation to support initiatives focused on preventing gang involvement. This research aspires to establish a more informed framework

for reducing youth gang membership, creating benefits for both individuals and society as a whole.

Methods of Approach

The following research will utilize a variety of data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the traits and life circumstances of current and former gang members. The study will incorporate insights from existing empirical studies that capture the experiences and motivations of gang members. Additionally, data will be collected from community and government organizations that work with at-risk youth, offering perspectives on the challenges that youth face. Reflecting on data from law enforcement databases will provide information related to the demographics of gang-affiliated individuals, and potential trends in gang membership. Furthermore, examining existing intervention programs will enable the research to identify gaps and limitations, which will assist in making improvements for future initiatives.

Contribution to the Field

This research will make significant contributions to the fields of criminal justice and youth development by providing a new understanding of the factors that influence youth gang involvement. This study's findings will bridge the existing gap in literature by offering information on the specific traits and backgrounds of gang-affiliated individuals. This will lead to more effective, evidence-based intervention strategies tailored to the unique needs of at-risk youth. The research will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, and community organizations, guiding them in the design and implementation of interventions that genuinely address the complexities surrounding gang involvement. By emphasizing the importance of customized approaches, this study will advocate for initiatives that not only aim at

reducing gang membership but also promote positive youth development, community safety, and community cohesion. The insights gained from this research will provide a stronger framework for understanding and intervening on factors leading to youth gang involvement.

Section II: Literature Review

History and Trends in Gang Activity

Gang activity has evolved over the decades, influenced largely by socio-economic and cultural changes within society. Howell et al. (2011) revealed that the first serious gangs to emerge in the United States flourished in big cities such as New York City and Chicago during the 1800s to early 1900s. From 1950 to the 1960s, the United States experienced a surge in gang activity alongside demographic changes, mostly due to Latino and Black populations migrating to urban areas. The establishment of the National Youth Gang Center in 1995 marked a pivotal moment in the understanding and response to gang-related issues. This initiative was created following reviews of research, programs, and policies related to gangs, aiming to better inform interventions and policy reforms (Howell et al., 2011).

Howell et al. (2011) emits that early gang formations was often rooted in ethnic or community-based alliances, providing social support and protection. However, as generations progressed, the nature of gang activities shifted towards organized, violent, and drug-related crimes. Beginning in the 1970s, gangs became more dangerous due to increased mobility and the use of lethal weapons. When the 1970 transition occurred from a manufacturing to service-based industry, the economy changed drastically which sparked gang activity. This economic shift reduced the demand for low-skill workers which meant that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds had to rely on low-paying temporary jobs, part-time jobs, welfare, or participation in drug trafficking and other street crimes to survive (Howell et al., 1998). This idea

of economic uncertainty has not only fueled gang activity but has also perpetuated cycles of violence and crime.

Psychological Traits of Gang Members

The psychological profiles of gang members reveal a complex interaction of traits contributing to their alignment with gang culture. Most gang members in the United States become involved between the ages of 12 and 18, a developmental period that makes youth vulnerable to peer influence, identity exploration, and social belonging (Alleyne & Wood, 2012). Individuals in this age group are experiencing emotional and social challenges, which can predispose them to gang involvement as a means of coping or finding acceptance.

A few key psychological traits identified among gang members include low self-esteem, aggression, and impulsivity. These traits can manifest risk-seeking, delinquent, and antisocial behaviors which makes gang affiliation more appealing as it provides an outlet for these characteristics to thrive. Many gang members also struggle with identity formation, leading to reliance on gang affiliation as a means of establishing self-worth (Alleyne & Wood, 2012).

A. Low Self-Esteem

Dmitrieva et al. (2016) explains that individuals with low self-esteem have weak social ties, which causes them to form bonds through delinquency and gang affiliations. Kaplan's general theory of deviant behavior relays that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to submit to peer pressure due to their unsuccessful attempts at finding alternate sources of positive self-worth (Dmitrieva et al., 2016). Once an individual has been rejected by their desired group of peers, it is likely they will turn to antisocial or deviant peers to gain their approval.

Just because low self-esteem is a psychological trait that most gang members exhibit, does not mean that all of them will carry this trait. Dmitrieva et al. (2016) found during their study that low self-esteem was associated with gang affiliation amongst the younger adolescents, but older adolescents with high levels of self-esteem are likely to become gang leaders. Low self-esteem is a trait that causes individuals to succumb to peer pressure, but when high levels of self-esteem are accompanied by other delinquent traits, it can be an indicator of gang leadership (Dmitrieva et al., 2016).

B. Aggression

Aggression is a prominent psychological trait associated with gang membership, and research has indicated gang members exhibit higher levels of aggressive behavior compared to non-gang offenders. Mallion & Wood (2018) found a significant correlation between aggression levels and ability emotional intelligence (AEI), suggesting that individuals with lower AEI are more likely to exhibit physical aggression. Their study underscores the role of emotional processing in influencing behavior, particularly in the context of gang involvement.

AEI, defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others, is a critical component in regulating aggressive behaviors (Mallion & Wood, 2018). Those with low AEI may struggle to navigate complex emotions, leading to difficulties in managing relationships effectively. Consequently, gang members who display characteristics of limited emotional processing tend to use aggressive behaviors as a means of resolving conflicts. This reliance on physical aggression can serve as both a coping mechanism and a method of asserting dominance within the gang dynamic (Mallion & Wood, 2018).

C. Impulsivity/Risk-Seeking Behaviors

Impulsivity and other risk-seeking behaviors are traits often observed in gang members, characterized by a tendency to act without thought or consideration of the consequences. These impulsive behaviors are closely linked to a variety of negative outcomes, including engagement in reckless and criminal activities. Research indicates that impulsivity serves as a strong predictor of gang involvement, as individuals often pursue immediate gratification or excitement without considering the long-term repercussions of their actions (Meier et al., 2013).

Studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between impulsivity and aggressive/reckless behaviors, which can heighten an individual's susceptibility to gang influences. For example, Meier et al. (2013) conducted a study that reveals a positive relationship between impulsivity and delinquency amongst youth residing in low-socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods. The findings of this study suggest that youth who reside in unsafe or unstable environments may exhibit higher levels of impulsivity, driving them towards gang affiliations as they seek thrilling experiences and validation from peers. Their counterpart, youth residing in high-SES neighborhoods, displayed a negative relationship between impulsivity and delinquency (Meier et al., 2013).

D. Antisocial Behaviors

Research relays that gang members typically have antisocial tendencies, and gang members that do not display antisocial behaviors are likely to exit the gang (Gordon et al., 2004). This suggests that a core aspect of gang identity is rooted in the acceptance and participation in antisocial behaviors. The social dynamics within gangs prioritize and

reward antisocial behaviors as measures of loyalty and status (Gordon et al., 2004). The association between antisocial behavior and gang members can also be understood through the lens of Bandura's social learning theory, which emits that behaviors are learned and reinforced through interactions with others (Bandura, 1971). In gang settings, engaging in antisocial acts becomes normalized, creating an environment where such behaviors are not only accepted but are often celebrated. This social reinforcement serves to further ensure that gang members are committed to the lifestyle of deviance and criminality, ultimately creating a cycle that is difficult to escape.

E. Identity Formation

Gangs often serve as crucial social structures for individuals who are navigating identity formation. In many cases, gang members feel a sense of belonging and community, filling a void for individuals who may feel isolated or marginalized in other aspects of their lives (Wood, 2014). For young gang members, especially those coming from unstable backgrounds or environments, gangs provide a source of shared experiences, loyalty, and friendship. The uncertainty-identity theory relays that those who have difficulty finding their individual identity will identify with a group, or in this case a gang (Wood, 2014). Once gang members associate their identity with a gang, they begin to reshape their values and beliefs to those promoted by the gang.

Backgrounds of Gang Members

Exploring the backgrounds of gang members reveals the prevalence of trauma and adversity that they have experienced in their lifetime in relation to their choice to affiliate with a gang. Gang members typically come from environments where they experienced adverse

childhood experiences, familial criminality, poverty/low-SES, and peer pressure. These factors collectively contribute to a cycle of vulnerability that makes gang affiliation seem appealing as a means of coping, belonging, or feeling protected.

A. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs encompass a range of traumatic events that individuals may encounter during their adolescent years. These experiences include but are not limited to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, household mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, incarcerated household member(s), separation of child from parent, and parental divorce/separation (Ulloa, 2023). Ulloa (2023) concluded that exposure to ACEs significantly increases the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, including gang involvement and illicit drug use.

Klein (2020) performed a study that illustrated the correlation between ACEs and the early initiation to drug and alcohol use. The findings revealed that each type of ACE experienced increased the likelihood of early engagement in substance use, with the exception of physical neglect. Furthermore, it was noted that individuals who witnessed violence in their community exhibited higher susceptibility to gang involvement (Klein, 2020). In addition, parents who have criminal records are likely to be less motivated to impose rules on their children and teach them societal values (Spapens & Moors, 2020). These connections highlight that not only does exposure to familial trauma contribute to development and behavioral issues, but the community context in which a child grows up also plays a critical role in shaping their choices and affiliations.

Further supporting this link between ACEs and gang membership, Quinn et al. (2017) conducted a study that interviewed male and female gang members on the adversities that they experienced in their childhood. The interviews revealed that almost all of the gang members experienced multiple ACEs, underscoring the theme that gang affiliation was used as a coping mechanism for dealing with their trauma and unstable home lives. Many participants in the Quinn et al. (2017) study lacked positive parental involvement as a crucial factor in their decisions to join gangs. This absence often led them to seek the companionship and validation found among peers, which contributed to them joining a gang for the purpose of obtaining a secure support system. The need to fill the emotional void left by parental absence is an overwhelming driving force, leading youth to prioritize affiliations with gangs over seeking healthy relationships. The combination of personal trauma, family dysfunction, and community violence sets the stage for vulnerable youth to gravitate toward gangs as a means of finding support and protection (Quinn et al., 2017).

B. Familial Criminality

Familial criminality is another significant factor contributing to gang affiliation, particularly among youth who grow up in environments where criminal behavior is normalized. In such households, children are often exposed to violence, substance abuse, and other illegal activities from an early age, leading to a desensitization of those behaviors. As a result, gang affiliation may not only seem like an accessible choice but also an expected part of their social development and identity. When children grow up in environments surrounded by criminal behavior, they internalize these experiences as “normal”. Many young children perceive joining a gang as a natural choice, given that

they grew up witnessing family members engage in gang activities daily (Quinn et al., 2017). These youth adopt the belief that engaging in illegal activities is a viable pathway to attain financial stability and respect. The expectation to participate in gang activities to achieve money, status, and security is a pressure that youth may experience as a result of intergenerational gang affiliation (Ulloa, 2023).

C. Poverty/Low-Socioeconomic Status

Poverty and low-socioeconomic status (SES) are critical factors that significantly contribute to gang affiliation, particularly amongst youth. The majority of the participants in the Quinn et al. (2017) study reported that they grew up in disadvantaged neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, gang activity, gun violence, drugs, and failing schools. These environmental factors create a context where survival often takes precedence over education and personal development, causing youth to fall into cycles of violence and criminality. Living in low-SES neighborhoods can severely limit access to resources and opportunities that are essential for positive development.

Youth who live in low-SES neighborhoods and have absent parents are often left to provide for themselves and siblings. Without proper guidance and resources, youth in low-SES communities may find themselves navigating challenges without the necessary skills, support systems, and funds, further increasing their vulnerability to negative influences (Klein, 2020). The intersection of poverty and low-SES with other factors such as educational failure and community violence creates a perfect storm that can make gang participation inevitable.

D. Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is a significant influence that drives individuals towards gang affiliation. Many gang members have expressed that they could either join a gang and be a part of the violence as a group or reject affiliation and become a victim of the violence (Quinn et al., 2017). This choice highlights the desperate circumstances in which many young individuals find themselves, especially in communities where gang involvement is prevalent and support systems and interventions are non-existent.

The pressure to conform to peer expectations can be particularly overwhelming during adolescence. In neighborhoods where gang culture is normalized, the desire to fit in can push youth toward joining gangs, even if they may be initially hesitant. The fear of being judged or victimized by peers can create a false sense of urgency to affiliate, even if it means engaging in illegal or violent activities (Merrin et al., 2015). Additionally, the camaraderie and perceived support that gangs offer can be particularly attractive to young individuals who feel isolated or marginalized in their everyday lives. For many, gangs provide a sense of purpose and identity that they cannot find within their families. This support network solidifies their commitment to the gang which makes it difficult for them to disentangle from (Merrin et al., 2015).

Existing Intervention Strategies

It is clear that youth gang involvement remains a pressing issue in many communities, posing significant challenges to public safety and youth development. Various intervention strategies have emerged to address the complex problem, encompassing efforts aimed at dissuading young people from gang association. These strategies often include a combination of

community and family support, educational programming, and collaboration with law enforcement and social services. By fostering a safe and supportive environment, these intervention strategies have reduced gang affiliation by empowering youth, developing skills, and providing opportunities for positive engagement in their communities. Understanding the effectiveness and dynamics of the existing intervention strategies is crucial in refining the current approaches, as well as the creation of future strategies.

A. Cognitive-Behavioral Approach

Studies on cognitive-behavioral research have revealed that youth and others who become involved in gangs typically exhibit impaired social-cognitive processes in comparison to their non-delinquent counterparts (Fisher et al., 2008). These impairments may include difficulties in interpreting social cues, managing emotions, and making sound decisions, which are critical for avoiding gang involvement. The cognitive-behavioral approach addresses these issues by providing structured interventions that teach participants to recognize and alter negative thinking patterns and behaviors. By improving social-cognitive skills such as emotional regulation, effective communication, and problem-solving skills, this intervention type empowers youth to navigate social situations in a healthier manner and withdraw from gang-related activities.

O'Connor & Waddell (2015) reviewed a series of intervention strategies and techniques, concluding that the cognitive-behavioral and skill-building approaches were the most effective. The cognitive-behavioral approach displayed a 26% reduction in delinquency, compared to other approaches such as job-related skill building programs that only provided a 6% reduction (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). This evidence underscores the importance of prioritizing cognitive-behavioral interventions within the

broader framework of gang prevention and youth rehabilitation initiatives, as they not only address immediate behavioral issues, but also foster long-term development of critical life skills that can reduce the likelihood of gang involvement.

B. Suppression Approach

The suppression approach primarily involves law enforcement strategies aimed at reducing gang activity through direct interventions, such as arrests, increased patrolling in at-risk neighborhoods, and focused deterrence initiatives (Ward et al., 2013). The purpose of using suppression tactics is to deter gang members from continuing to engage in criminal activity. Some jurisdictions have created ordinances that are meant to keep known gang members from associating with others in public, with the intention that they would be less likely to re-offend or recruit new members into their gang. The Chicago Gang Congregation Ordinance allows police officers to remove gang members from a public area if they are loitering with one or more other persons and can issue up to a \$500 fine or up to 6 months imprisonment if they are found in violation (Wood et al., n.d.).

While this intervention method can provide immediate control over gang-related activities, it often faces criticism due to its potential to create tensions between youth and law enforcement. Some may argue that suppression tactics lead to over-policing of communities, disproportionately impacting minority groups and failing to address the root causes of gang involvement. The aggressive enforcement of this strategy may make it more challenging to create productive relationships that are essential for effective crime prevention and intervention. Suppression approaches may be best paired with other strategies that involve social services, community organizations, and local stakeholders. For example, law enforcement agencies could partner with outreach programs,

educational institutions, and mental health services to address the underlying factors that contribute to youth gang involvement, while also implementing their enforcement measures.

C. Detached Worker Intervention

The detached worker intervention model is an innovative approach that seeks to engage at-risk youth in their natural environments. Ward et al. (2013) explains that this strategy involves trained professionals, who actively reach out to youth in communities where gang affiliation is prevalent, whether it is in neighborhoods, schools, or other public areas. The primary goal is to establish meaningful relationships with youth, providing them with mentorship and support that can help them navigate the challenges that they face whether they are active in a gang or just living in a high-risk area. Detached workers connect youth with community resources, education and job opportunities, and mental health services when needed and assist them in bettering their skills (Ward et al., 2013).

Detached workers are trained to respond to the unique needs of each individual, tailoring support to address specific situations and challenges. By spending time in the community, these workers gain valuable insights into the local context, allowing them to better understand the social dynamics at play and to identify potential risks that may lead to gang involvement. This approach traces back to the 1970s when the Philadelphia Crisis Intervention Network created several new gang disengagement interventions, one being a detached worker intervention. Although there was no formal evaluation of its implementation, police data showed that after detached workers had been patrolling certain areas, there was a decrease in crime (Ward et al., 2013). These findings suggest

that the presence of detached workers not only helps build trust and rapport amongst youth but also contributes to overall community safety.

D. Multisystemic Therapy

Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is a comprehensive and intensive intervention method designed to address the complex needs of at-risk youth involved in delinquent behavior and gang affiliation (Ward et al., 2013). This approach recognizes that youth behavior is influenced by multiple systems, including their families, schools, peers, communities, etc. By focusing on these interconnected systems, MST aims to create lasting changes in the lives of youth by providing tailored support in these sectors of their lives. MST therapists usually have low caseloads of about 4 to 8, because they are supposed to be available to their patients 24/7, usually over the span of 3 to 5 months (Ward et al., 2013). MST is usually suggested for youth who display antisocial behaviors, or those who have succumbed to sexual behavior problems, substance abuse, delinquency, or those who are at risk of out-of-home placements. Placement in a psychiatric or correctional facility is avoided through the use of MST and has been proven to be extremely cost-effective compared to other out-of-home options (Ward et al., 2013).

Boxer et al. (2017) emits that although MST is a proper intervention strategy, it is less effective for gang-involved youth compared to non-gang-involved youth. Gang-involved youth were more likely to fail out of the MST treatment by lack of participation or re-offending. Researchers performed a study relaying that about 62% of gang-involved youth cases were successful, while 85% of cases for non-gang-involved youth were successfully closed (Boxer et al., 2017). This shows that the intervention strategy is

effective in general but may need some modifications to better address the challenges faced by gang-involved youth.

E. Aggression Replacement Training

Aggression Replacement Training (ART) aims to modify the behaviors of youth who show chronic aggression. The typical ART program focuses on individuals but can be performed in a group setting. Ward et al. (2013) conducted a study including a group of ART participants and a control group of non-ART participants. After the end of the 10-week program, ART participants performed significantly better than non-ART participants across seven different skill areas. After eight months, researchers followed up with all participants and found out that more of the ART participants were employed than the non-ART participants. Fewer of the ART participants had been arrested compared to their counterparts, and they also demonstrated better social interactions and less aggressive behaviors (Ward et al., 2013). ART has been deemed an effective method for promoting skill acquisition and performance, improving anger control, decreasing acting-out behaviors, and increasing prosocial behaviors (Goldstein & Glick, 1994).

Section III: Theoretical Review

Understanding the complexities of youth gang involvement requires a comprehensive exploration of the underlying social, psychological, and environmental factors that contribute to this behavior. The application of various theoretical frameworks provides valuable insights into why young people become involved in gangs and how best to address this issue. By examining these theories, we can better comprehend the motivations, influences, and circumstances that lead to gang affiliation, which in turn informs the development of more effective intervention

strategies. This section will review key criminological theories and demonstrate how they can be applied to understand and reduce youth gang involvement.

Application of Theories to Youth Gang Involvement

A. Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory asserts that delinquent and gang-related behaviors are acquired through interactions with peers and influential individuals who already engage in such activities (Gagnon, 2018). This theory posits that deviant behavior is learned through the same social mechanisms that any other behavior is learned (Tolle, 2016). According to this perspective, youth are more likely to join gangs by observing, imitating, and receiving reinforcement for criminal activities from their social environment. Gagnon (2018) explains that the probability of an individual succumbing to peer influence increases when the influencer is a family or friend, proximity is close, and exposure is frequent. The social learning theory proves that having these strong and consistent social bonds with influential figures who participate in gang-related activities significantly raises the risk of youth gang involvement.

B. Interactional Theory

The interactional theory emphasizes the importance of social relationships and peer interactions in the development of delinquent behaviors, including gang involvement. This theory emits that the behaviors of youth are shaped through ongoing interactions with peers and family members and that these relationships can either deter or encourage involvement in gangs (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). The theory seeks to analyze how individuals react to and are influenced by their social environments. Alleyne & Wood (2010) explain that the interactional theory is a combination of the control and

social learning theories, suggesting that involvement in gangs is reinforced by weak social bonds, positive reinforcement of criminal behavior, imitation of criminal peers, and the belief that criminal behaviors are acceptable. Consequently, the interactional theory promotes that at-risk youth are more vulnerable to gang involvement when they lack strong attachments with their family and community, making them susceptible to peer influence (Alleyne & Wood, 2010).

C. General Strain Theory

The general strain theory reflects that individuals who experience strains and stressors in their life are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors as a way of coping with their negative emotions. Some strains that may weigh on the lives of these individuals are parental rejection, harsh/abusive discipline, school problems, economic problems, discrimination, the inability to achieve goals, and criminal victimization (Thaxton & Agnew, 2018). However, the general strain theory emphasizes that experiencing these stressors alone does not lead to delinquency; instead, it is the lack of healthy coping strategies. When individuals are unable to effectively regulate their emotional responses to stress, they may turn to criminal or gang-related activities as a source of relief (Wooten, 2021). This perspective highlights the importance of teaching healthy coping mechanisms in response to life's strains and stressors.

D. Routine Activities Theory

The routine activities theory suggests that the likelihood of criminal activity, or in this case youth gang involvement, increases when there is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship (Drawve et al., 2013). This theory emphasizes that crime is a result of everyday routines and environmental factors,

rather than underlying personality or psychological traits. This means that when individuals spend time in environments where there are accessible targets, with peers who engage in delinquent behavior, and without supervision, the risk of gang-related activities escalates. Breetzke & Cohn (2013) portray that the manipulation of the three elements of the routine activities theory (motivated offender, suitable target, and absence of capable guardianship) ultimately increases or decreases the likelihood of crime.

E. Social Disorganization Theory

The social disorganization theory explains that youth gang involvement is more likely to occur in communities characterized by poverty, high residential turnover, and social instability (Sampson & Groves, 1989). These characteristics weaken the social structure and reduce the community's ability to regulate behavior and enforce social norms. As a result, neighborhoods experiencing this social disorganization tend to have higher rates of delinquency, which translates to higher rates of gang formation (Pizarro & McGloin, 2006). This environment often fosters a sense of alienation and marginalization among residents, and especially youth, making them more susceptible to peer influence and gang recruitment. The lack of strong social institutions (schools, churches, community organizations, etc.) in socially disorganized neighborhoods diminishes opportunities for youth to seek out positive social interactions and relationships.

Section IV: Recommendations for Future Intervention Strategies

Building upon the theoretical frameworks and empirical research discussed, it is essential to develop intervention strategies that address the root causes and social dynamics of youth gang involvement. These strategies should assist families, schools, communities, and law enforcement agencies in collaborating to create a cohesive support system that promotes positive youth

development, ultimately disrupting the cycle of youth gang involvement. The following recommendations aim to enhance existing programs and introduce new approaches tailored to the specific needs of at-risk youth.

A. Implement Community-Based Intervention Programs

To effectively counter the influence of gangs, interventions must be developed within the communities where at-risk youth reside. After reviewing the principles of the social disorganization theory it is clear that community-based programs are needed to strengthen social cohesion in neighborhoods to provide positive alternatives to gang involvement (Sampson & Groves, 1989). These programs should offer a range of critical resources and support systems including safe spaces and mentorship opportunities. Community centers and youth clubs could provide youth with a place to receive guidance, academic support, and emotional support from positive influences. By providing positive role models and a sense of belonging, these initiatives can directly address the need for positive identity formation (Wood, 2014). Community-based intervention programs could also offer recreational activities to keep youth engaged and minimize the unstructured free time that the routine activities theory suggests can increase vulnerability to crime (Drawve et al., 2013).

The success of the detached worker intervention model underscores the importance of meeting youth where they are and building trust within their natural environments. Expanding and adequately funding community outreach programs is crucial for connecting with youth who may be hesitant to seek help through traditional methods. Detached workers and community-based intervention programs can work together to identify at-risk youth and connect with them with appropriate resources to avoid their involvement in gangs. By providing positive role models and opportunities for positive engagement, community-based interventions can directly

address the need for youth to feel a sense of belonging. These positive role models can assist youth in developing a positive self-concept and personal strengths rooted in their community, rather than in gang affiliation.

B. Enhance Family and Parental Involvement

The research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and familial criminality, the family environment plays a significant role in a youth's susceptibility to gang involvement. The presence of trauma, instability, and exposure to criminal behavior within the home creates extreme vulnerability, often leading youth to seek a support system elsewhere. Therefore, intervention strategies must actively engage families and provide them with the support and resources necessary to create stable and nurturing home environments. This may involve offering parenting classes that focus on positive discipline, effective communication, and building strong relationships (Ordonez, 2008).

Programs should also address the impact of familial criminality by providing support for parents with criminal histories and working to break the intergenerational cycles of gang involvement. Incorporating trauma-informed care for families with a history of ACEs can empower parents to become a protective factor against gang affiliation. Providing resources for financial stability and addressing issues like substance abuse and domestic violence within the family can also reduce the strains that contribute to gang involvement and other delinquent behaviors (Thaxton & Agnew, 2018). Connecting families with social services, financial assistance, substance abuse treatment, etc., can alleviate significant stressors that would usually push youth towards external sources of support and income. By enhancing family and parental involvement, a more stable foundation for youth development can be created and vulnerability to gang affiliation can be significantly reduced (Ordonez, 2008).

C. Expand School-Based Intervention Initiatives

Schools are critical environments for identifying at-risk youth and implementing early intervention strategies. Given that many gang members become involved in their adolescent years, schools provide a consistent point of contact and structured environment for interventions to take place. School-based interventions should focus on building social and emotional skills, providing academic support, and teaching conflict resolution strategies (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1997). These interventions should also prioritize the implementation of anti-bullying programs to reduce the dynamics of peer pressure. Offering counseling services and mental health support programs in schools can assist in addressing the psychological traits associated with gang affiliation. For example, youth experiencing low self-esteem, high levels of aggression/impulsivity, and trauma could use interventions to boost their confidence, self-worth, and coping skills outside of gang validation.

School-based initiatives would also give youth an opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities such as sports, art programs, community service opportunities, and other clubs that give them purpose outside gang affiliation. These activities offer alternatives to spending time in risky environments, which aligns with the principles of the Routine Activities Theory (Drawve et al., 2013). By making these opportunities accessible to at-risk youth through school, they can be diverted from participating in gang activities and learn how to live a healthier lifestyle.

D. Adopt Cognitive-Behavioral and Skill-Building Interventions

The research reviewed on psychological traits of gang members indicates that they exhibit deficits in social-cognitive processes including emotional regulation, decision-making,

and problem-solving (Fisher et al., 2008). Cognitive-behavioral therapy and other skill-building approaches have shown promises in addressing these issues, as they focus on identifying and changing negative behaviors. Implementing this intervention type will teach individuals how to recognize and manage their emotions effectively. Youth who grow up without proper guidance are not taught the skills needed and associated with avoiding gangs. The goal is to equip individuals with the psychological tools necessary to resist negative influences, build healthy relationships, and pursue productive lives outside of gang involvement.

E. Strengthen Law Enforcement and Community Partnerships

While community-based programs, increased family/parental support, and school-based initiatives are vital for early intervention, a comprehensive approach to addressing gang involvement also requires effective strategies involving law enforcement. It is crucial that law enforcement engages with the community to boost trust and collaboration, straying away from solely enforcing punitive measures. This involves fostering open communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for addressing gang-related issues. Community policing models, where officers are integrated into neighborhoods and build relationships with residents, would be highly effective in identifying at-risk youth and building trust.

Law enforcement can also play a role in gang intervention by participating in community outreach programs, visiting schools to educate youth about the dangers of gang involvement, and serving as positive role models. It is essential that these interactions are positive and build rapport with youth, rather than instilling fear or reinforcing negative stereotypes that are often associated with law enforcement officers. By actively participating in these positive interactions, law enforcement can help to break down barriers with youth who may otherwise view them with suspicion or hostility. Ultimately, strengthening law enforcement and community partnerships

allows for a more holistic and effective response to gang violence, combining enforcement strategies with intervention efforts. This integrated approach acknowledges the complex nature of gang involvement and seeks to address it from multiple angles, recognizing that law enforcement is just one piece of the solution.

F. Address Structural and Socioeconomic Barriers

Addressing the root causes of poverty, lack of opportunity, and systematic inequalities is fundamental to any long-term strategy related to gang interventions. High rates of unemployment, limited access to education, inadequate housing, and other discriminatory occurrences create environments where youth may seek out gang affiliation (Quinn et al., 2017). Therefore, interventions must go beyond addressing individual behaviors and actively work to disassemble structural and socioeconomic barriers. This may involve advocating for policies that promote economic development and job creation in disadvantaged communities, ensuring quality education, and addressing any discriminatory practices.

Investing in community infrastructure, such as parks and community centers, would provide safe and positive alternative environments for youth to congregate. Furthermore, addressing issues such as mass incarceration and the consequences of criminal records is crucial, as these can severely limit opportunities for individuals, allowing cycles of poverty and crime to continue (Quinn et al., 2017). This intervention method highlights that creating opportunities and addressing systematic disadvantages is vital to reducing the appeal of gang involvement. Without addressing these underlying structural issues, other intervention efforts may only provide temporary relief, as these barriers that foster gang involvement would continue to occur.

Section V: Conclusion

This report has underscored the nature of youth gang involvement, revealing that it is not a singular issue, but a complex interaction of individual psychological traits, family dynamics, environmental influences, and structural and socioeconomic factors. The research reviewed consistently points to deficits in cognitive processes amongst gang members, including challenges with emotional regulation, decision-making, and problem-solving. Furthermore, backgrounds marked by adverse childhood experiences, familial criminality, poverty, and peer pressure have shown to increase a youth's vulnerability to gang affiliation. The theoretical review provides a framework for understanding these factors, including how social learning, interactional dynamics, general strain, routine activities, and social disorganization theories contribute to explaining why youth become involved in gangs.

The examination of existing intervention strategies reveals both promising approaches and areas for improvement. Cognitive-behavioral and skill-building therapies show significant potential in addressing the psychological deficits associated with gang members. Community-based programs, family engagement initiatives, and school-based interventions are crucial for providing positive alternatives, support systems, and skill development opportunities. While law enforcement plays a necessary role, its effectiveness is maximized when partnerships with the community are built on trust and collaboration. The study emphasizes that addressing underlying structural and socioeconomic barriers is essential in making sustainable changes in the realm of youth gang involvement. It is made clear that issues such as poverty, lack of opportunity, and systematic inequalities must be tackled through policy changes and investments in disadvantaged communities.

In conclusion, effectively reducing gang involvement amongst youth requires comprehensive and integrated approaches. No single intervention strategy is sufficient on its own, suggesting that the recommendations presented must be implemented in a coordinated manner. By addressing the psychological vulnerabilities of youth, strengthening their support systems, providing positive alternatives, fostering community trust, and dismantling systematic disadvantages, stakeholders can create environments where youth are less likely to be drawn into gangs. This requires commitment from policymakers, educators, community members, law enforcement, and families working together to build safer and more cohesive communities for all at-risk youth.

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