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Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth



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The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.

Gang members engage in more delinquent behavior than their peers who are not in gangs. The Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP) study shows that compared with youth who are not gang members, those who are gang members more often commit assault, robbery, breaking and entering, and felony theft; indulge in binge drinking; use and sell drugs; and are arrested (see figure 1). Other studies also show that gang members are more likely to commit violent crimes and property crimes and use drugs (Spergel, 1995; Thornberry, 1998). They are more than twice as likely to carry guns and three times as likely to sell drugs (Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995).

Why do some youth join gangs while others do not? Understanding what predicts gang membership is vital for preventing youth from joining gangs. The SSDP study

is especially valuable for understanding the predictors of gang membership. As a longitudinal project that has tracked a sample of more than 800 youth from 1985 to the present, SSDP affords the opportunity to trace the effect of factors present in youth's lives at ages 10 to 12 on the likelihood of their joining and remaining in gangs between the ages of 13 and 18. Although numerous other studies have focused on gang membership (see Howell, 1998, for a review), their cross-sectional design makes it difficult to disentangle predictors of gang membership from the effects. Only two other projects—the Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry and Burch, 1997; Browning, Thornberry, and Porter, 1999) and the Denver Youth Survey (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993)—have reported prospective data on gang membership. (These projects are funded by OJJDP as part of its Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency.)

This Bulletin presents SSDP data on youth who join gangs. It summarizes findings on gender, race/ethnicity, age at joining, and duration of membership; analyzes the relationship between risk factors present at ages 10 to 12 and the likelihood of joining a gang between ages 13 and 18; and discusses prevention-related implications of the risk factor analysis.

A Message From OJJDP

What leads a particular youth to join a gang? Identifying early precursors of youth gang membership can facilitate the development of more effective interventions to prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs.

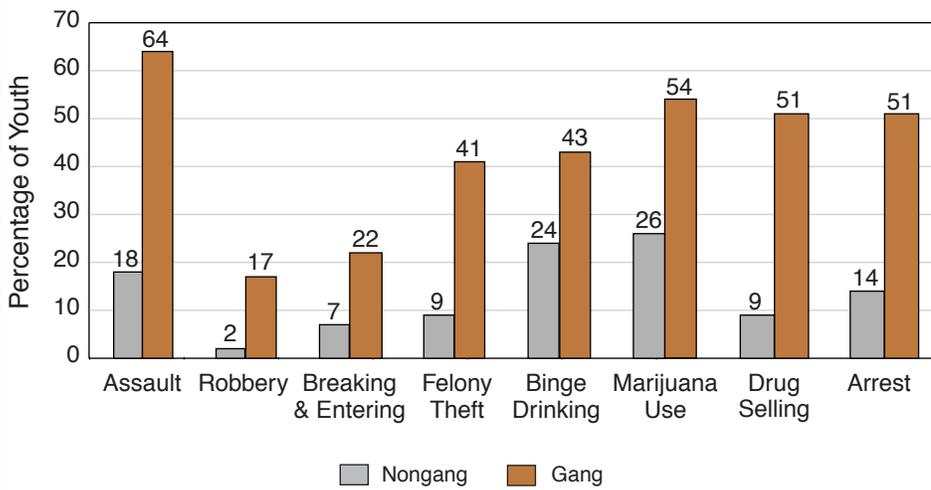
The Seattle Social Development Project is a longitudinal study of youth living in high-crime neighborhoods. The study is designed to enhance our understanding of the predictors of gang participation.

This Bulletin draws on data from the Seattle study to assess how risk factors present in the lives of 10- to 12-year-old youth affect the probability of their later participation in gangs. The Bulletin also explores implications of this risk factor analysis for the design of successful prevention strategies.

The Seattle study confirms that youth who participate in gangs are more likely than their non-gang-involved peers to engage in assault, robbery, breaking and entering, and felony theft. Other studies also indicate that gang members are more likely than juveniles who are not involved in gangs to commit violent crimes and property offenses.

Thus, the early precursors to gang membership identified by the Seattle study offer the potential of improving efforts not only to prevent youth gang membership but also to combat juvenile crime.

Figure 1: Prevalence of Delinquency Among Gang and Nongang Youth Ages 13 to 18, SSDP Sample



Note: Youth were interviewed at ages 13 to 16 and 18. In each interview, youth reported activities for the past month (except for drug selling and arrest, which were reported for the past year). For gang members, prevalence reflects only the year(s) of membership.

Demographics of Gang Membership

Of the 808 SSDP participants, 124 (15.3 percent) reported that they joined a gang at some point between the ages of 13 and 18. Of the 124 participants who joined gangs, the majority (90) were male. Whereas 8.6 percent of all female participants joined gangs, 21.8 percent of all male participants joined (figure 2).

Gang members came from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds—European American, African American, Asian American, Native American, and Hispanic and other ethnicities. However, the rate for joining a gang was highest among African American SSDP participants. As figure 2 shows, 26.2 percent of all African American participants reported joining a gang, compared with 10.2 percent of all European American participants, 12.4 percent of all Asian American participants, and 19.7 percent of other ethnicities.

Youth in the Seattle sample joined gangs throughout adolescence. Figure 3 shows the cumulative percentage of youth at each age who reported ever joining a gang. Youth were at risk of joining every year, but the risk rose most sharply at age 15—the age at which most students make the transition to high school.

SSDP Sample and Methodology

SSDP has tracked a sample of 808 persons since 1985, when the participants were fifth-grade students at 18 Seattle, WA, public schools that serve high-crime neighborhoods. Approximately half of the participants are female (396, or 49 percent of the sample). The sample is also ethnically diverse: 372 (46 percent) of the participants identified themselves as European American, 195 (24 percent) as African American, 170 (21 percent) as Asian American, 45 (6 percent) as Native American, and 26 (3 percent) as other ethnicities. Roughly half of the participants are from low-income families. Parents of 46 percent of the participants reported a family income of less than \$20,000 a year. Fifty-two percent of the participants took part in the National School Lunch/School Breakfast Program at some point in the fifth, sixth, or seventh grade.

Data on the SSDP participants were collected annually from age 10 through age 16 and then were collected again at age 18. The participants responded to a wide range of questions on family, community, school, peers, gangs, alcohol and drug use, drug selling, violence, weapon use, and victimization. Data were also

collected from the participants' parents or guardians, teachers, and school, police, and court records. Collection of data on gang membership began when the participants were 13 years old.

Figure 2: Percentage of Youth Ages 13 to 18 Who Joined a Gang, SSDP Sample

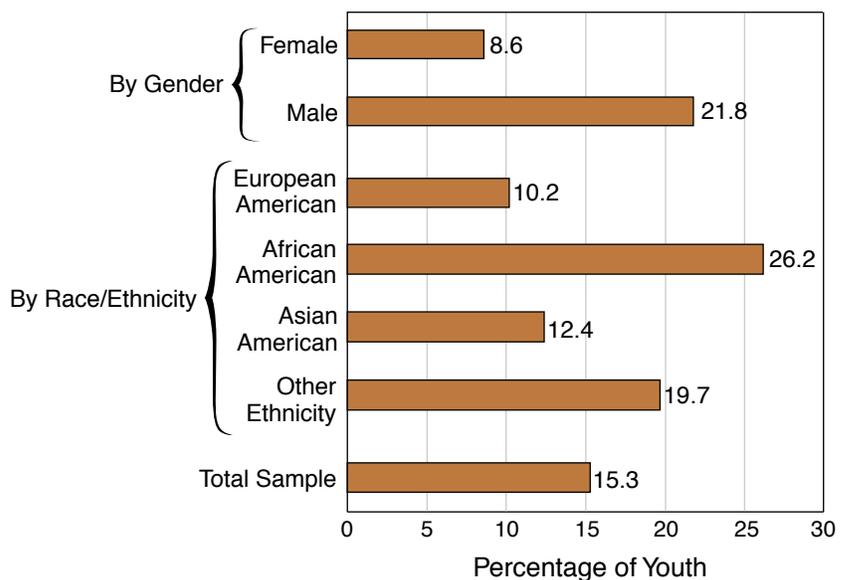
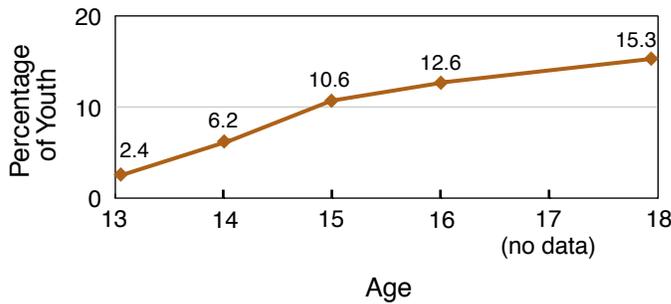


Figure 3: Cumulative Percentage of Youth Reporting Ever Joining a Gang, Ages 13 to 16 and 18, SSDP Sample



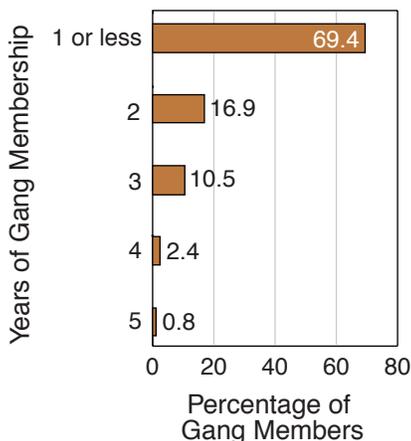
Note: Youth were at risk of joining every year, but the risk rose most sharply at age 15, at the transition to high school.

Duration of Gang Membership

Of the SSDP participants who became gang members, most belonged to the gang for a short period of time (figure 4). Of the 124 who joined gangs, 69 percent belonged for 1 year or less and 31 percent belonged for longer. Only 0.8 percent belonged for 5 years—the maximum period studied.

The SSDP findings on duration of membership are comparable to the findings of the two other longitudinal studies on gang members mentioned above. Denver Youth Survey researchers reported that 9–11 percent of their sample joined a gang (Esbensen,

Figure 4: Duration of Gang Membership, SSDP Sample



Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993). Of those who joined a gang, 67 percent belonged for 1 year or less and 33 percent belonged for more than 1 year. In the Rochester Youth Development Study sample, 25 percent joined a gang. Of those who joined a gang, 53 percent belonged for 1 year or less and 47 percent belonged for more than 1 year (Thornberry et al., 1993).

Childhood Risk Factors That Predict Joining and Remaining in a Gang

The table on page 4 shows risk factors present when the SSDP participants were ages 10 to 12 (fifth and sixth grades), with odds ratios that indicate the extent to which each factor predicted whether the participants would join a gang between ages 13 and 18. (For example, the odds ratio of 3.6 for “availability of marijuana” means that youth from neighborhoods where marijuana was most available were 3.6 times more likely to join a gang, compared with other youth.) The table shows that the predictors of gang membership are found in the neighborhood, family, school, peer group, and individual. Having an elevated score for a statistically significant risk factor (i.e., one reliably related to subsequent gang membership) increased the odds of joining a gang about two to three times. The finding of multiple predictors suggests that no single overriding factor explains gang membership. Not all factors tested were reliably related to subsequent gang membership.

Although low bonding with parents and low religious service attendance were examined as possible predictors of gang membership, neither was found to predict membership.

Risk Factors and Duration of Gang Membership

These findings suggest that youth join gangs as a result of antisocial influences in neighborhoods, antisocial tendencies in families and peers, failure to perform well in school, and early initiation of individual problem behaviors. All of these factors distinguish youth who join gangs from those who do not. What distinguishes youth who remain in gangs for more than 1 year from those who remain for only 1 year or less? The Seattle study indicates that youth who were the most behaviorally and socially maladjusted in childhood were most likely to be gang members for several years. In particular, youth who exhibited early signs of violent and externalizing behavior (e.g., aggression, oppositional behavior, and inattentive and hyperactive behaviors) and those who associated with antisocial peers were more than twice as likely to remain in a gang for more than 1 year than for just 1 year or less.

Multiple Risk Factors

Not only do predictors of gang membership exist in various elements of a youth’s environment, but the predictors add up. The more risk factors a youth experienced, the more likely he or she was to join a gang. To assess the effect of multiple risk factors on the likelihood of joining a gang, SSDP researchers divided participants into four groups (each representing one-fourth of the sample), based on the number of risk factors for gang membership they experienced at ages 10 to 12. “No-risk” youth experienced either no risk factors or only one, “low-risk” youth experienced two to three risk factors, “medium-risk” youth experienced four to six risk factors, and “high-risk” youth experienced seven or more risk factors. As figure 5 shows, compared with no-risk youth, low-risk youth were 3 times more likely to join a gang, medium-risk youth were 5 times more likely to join, and high-risk youth were 13 times more likely to join. The more risk factors present in a youth’s life, the higher his or her odds of joining a gang.

Childhood Predictors of Joining and Remaining in a Gang, SSDP Sample

Risk Factor	Odds Ratio*	Risk Factor	Odds Ratio*
Neighborhood		Individual	
Availability of marijuana	3.6	Low religious service attendance	ns [‡]
Neighborhood youth in trouble	3.0	Early marijuana use	3.7
Low neighborhood attachment	1.5	Early violence [§]	3.1 (2.4)
Family		Antisocial beliefs	2.0
Family structure [†]		Early drinking	1.6
One parent only	2.4	Externalizing behaviors [§]	2.6 (2.6)
One parent plus other adults	3.0	Poor refusal skills	1.8
Parental attitudes favoring violence	2.3		
Low bonding with parents	ns [‡]		
Low household income	2.1		
Sibling antisocial behavior	1.9		
Poor family management	1.7		
School			
Learning disabled	3.6		
Low academic achievement	3.1		
Low school attachment	2.0		
Low school commitment	1.8		
Low academic aspirations	1.6		
Peer group			
Association with friends who engage in problem behaviors [§]	2.0 (2.3)		

* Odds of joining a gang between the ages of 13 and 18 for youth who scored in the worst quartile on each factor at ages 10 to 12 (fifth and sixth grades), compared with all other youth in the sample. For example, the odds ratio for “availability of marijuana” is 3.6. This means that youth from neighborhoods where marijuana was most available were 3.6 times more likely to join a gang, compared with other youth.

† Compared with two-parent households.

‡ ns = not a significant predictor.

§ These factors also distinguished sustained gang membership (i.e., more than 1 year) from transient membership (1 year or less). For each factor, the number in parentheses indicates the odds of being a sustained gang member (compared with the odds of being a transient member) for youth at risk on that factor.

Implications for Prevention

These findings from the SSDP study have three implications for efforts to prevent youth from joining gangs:

Prevention efforts should begin early. Although the SSDP study found that the peak age for joining a gang was 15, this does not mean that prevention efforts should be aimed at 14-year-olds. The risk factors that predicted gang membership in this study were measured when the participants were ages 10 to 12 (fifth and sixth grades)—well before the peak age for joining a gang. Prevention efforts can target these risk factors during the late elementary grades. Some predictors of gang membership, such as marijuana use and violence, are problems in themselves and should be prevented (Ellickson et al., 1998; Ellickson and Morton, 1999; Loeber and Farrington, 2001). SSDP study findings suggest that efforts to prevent these precursors of gang membership may benefit from starting even before the fifth grade.

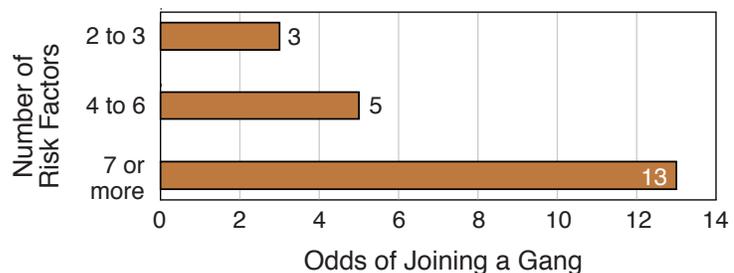
Prevention efforts should target youth exposed to multiple risk factors. This study has shown that the more risk factors present in a youth’s environment, the higher his or her odds of joining a gang.

Compared with youth who experienced none or only 1 of the 21 risk factors discussed in this study, youth who experienced 7 or more of the risk factors were 13 times more likely to join a gang. Decreasing the number of risk factors in the environments of youth should help to reduce the prevalence of gang membership.

Prevention efforts should address all facets of youth’s lives. As noted earlier, factors that influence youth to join gangs occur in the neighborhood, family, school,

peer group, and individual. Efforts to prevent youth from becoming gang members must address the different aspects of their lives. There is no single solution, no “magic bullet” that will prevent youth from joining gangs. Although the thought of combating the 21 predictors of gang membership discussed here may seem daunting, anyone—a parent, brother, sister, teacher, friend, or member of the community—can find ways to reduce the chances that a youth will become a gang member. If these efforts are coordinated,

Figure 5: Odds of Joining a Gang at Ages 13 to 18, by Number of Childhood Risk Factors Present at Ages 10 to 12, SSDP Sample



Note: The odds are expressed as comparisons with youth who had no risk factors or only one factor.

the reduction of risk for gang membership will be even greater.

Taken together, the findings reported in this Bulletin suggest some clear guidelines for new strategies to prevent youth from joining gangs. Prevention efforts should start early, focus on youth with multiple risk factors, and take a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple influences.

For Further Information

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National Youth Gang Center

As part of its comprehensive, coordinated response to America's gang problem, OJJDP funds the National Youth Gang Center. NYGC assists State and local jurisdictions in the collection, analysis, and exchange of information on gang-related demographics, legislation, literature, research, and promising program strategies. NYGC coordinates activities of the OJJDP Gang Consortium, a group of Federal agencies, gang program representatives, and service providers that works to coordinate gang information and programs. NYGC also provides training and technical assistance for OJJDP's Rural Gang, Gang-Free Schools, and Gang-Free Communities Initiatives. For more information, contact:

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