

# Youth Gangs and Definitional Issues: When Is a Gang a Gang, and Why Does It Matter?

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*The recent explosion in gang research has highlighted the importance of consistent definitions for gang affiliation and gang-related crime. Definitional questions have assumed greater significance in the wake of broad-ranging prevention and intervention strategies. In this article, the authors utilize a sample of approximately 6,000 middle-school students to examine the youth gang phenomenon using five increasingly restrictive membership definitions. The least restrictive definition includes all youth who claim gang membership at some point in time. The most restrictive definition includes only those youth who are current core gang members who indicate that their gang has some degree of organizational structure and whose members are involved in illegal activities. The authors examine the differentially defined gang and nongang youths on various demographic characteristics, theoretical factors, and levels of self-reported crime. The authors also address the theoretical and policy implications of shifting definitions of gang membership.*

Social science research is predicated on the practice of employing definitions that allow for replication and independent assessment of any set of research findings. As a general observation, gang research in the United States suffers from definitional shortcomings and calls into question its abil-

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ity to inform policy makers and expand criminological knowledge. There is little, if any, consensus as to what constitutes a gang and who is a gang member, let alone what gangs do, either inside or outside the law (Ball & Curry, 1995; Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Gardner, 1993; Klein, 1969; Miller, 1975, 1980; Needle & Stapleton, 1983). When describing their conceptual and operational definitions, many contemporary gang researchers note the absence of definitional consensus. They subsequently identify two widely used benchmarks for assessing whether a given social group is a gang: (1) youth status, defined as an age classification ranging between 10 and the early 20s or even older, and (2) the engagement by group members in law-violating behavior or, at a minimum, "imprudent" behavior. What follows this declaration often takes the following rather vague form: "The definition of gangs used here relies on the work of the leading experts in the field" (see, for example, Howell, 1998, p. 1). The irony, of course, is that even the "experts" cannot agree on what constitutes a gang or gang behavior, and many experts find fault with nearly every definition.

Failure to employ universal definitions of youth gangs and gang membership has numerous implications for gang research and gang-related public policy. For example, research on the extent and nature of the gang problem faces three possible outcomes: (1) accurately stating the gang problem with the best definition for the research question, (2) underestimating it with a far too narrow definition, or (3) overestimating it if the definition is too broad, capturing individuals, groups, and behavior that are of little interest to the intended audience. Of importance, then, is the question guiding the research reported in this article: When is a gang a gang and why does it matter?

The possibility of under- or overestimating gang membership is far from a trivial matter. Resource allocation and public concern (i.e., fear of gang crime) are largely shaped by reports of the magnitude of the problem. Estimates of gang members in the United States in the mid-1990s ranged from about 660,000 to perhaps as many as 1.5 million (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1997; Curry, Ball, & Decker, 1996; Knox, 1996), numbers that at least one gang expert characterized as "probably conservative because many jurisdictions deny, often for political and image reasons, that there is a problem, especially in the early stages of youth gang development in a community" (Huff, 1998, p. 1). Public policies, particularly law enforcement practices, respond in very direct ways to these numbers, whether the estimates are for the nation or a single community. Hence, how gang is defined impacts the numerator in any per capita rate, let alone the gross number of gangs or gang members.

In addition to the issue of accurately estimating the size of the gang problem is the concern of accurately assessing the epidemiology of gang mem-

bers. Quite disparate estimates exist with regard to the demographic composition of youth gangs (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). Law enforcement data paint a picture of inner-city, minority males (generally from single-parent households) (National Youth Gang Center, 1999). Ethnographic studies of older and more homogeneous samples tend to confirm this picture. Surveys, however, call into question the extent to which these stereotypes accurately depict youth gang members.

In this article, we attempt to disentangle some of the definitional questions that arise. Do gang definitions used in community or school-based surveys, for example, produce overestimates of gang youths? That is, do surveys include youths who would not be considered gang members by law enforcement? Or, alternatively, are law enforcement estimates too narrow in scope, excluding individuals who should be included as gang members? Will more restrictive definitions in survey research produce lower prevalence estimates? Will these more restrictive definitions change the demographic depiction of gang members? More specifically, does the application of a more restrictive definition of gang membership in survey data produce estimates of gang membership and depictions of gang members that are more similar to those derived from law enforcement data?

Clearly, the definitions of gang and gang membership used by researchers and policy makers have important implications for both research results and the ways in which policy makers employ those findings. The present study, then, provides multiple answers to a single compound research question: When is a gang a gang, and why does it matter? We propose that by shifting from a less restrictive definition through increasingly more restrictive ones, the analysis should yield valuable insights into the overall gang phenomenon.

### *DEFINING THE GANG*

Nearly from the onset of 20th-century gang research, a popular strategy for defining gangs was to let the youths do it themselves (i.e., those who claimed membership). Thrasher (1927/1963), recognizing the scientific need "to discover what is typical rather than what is unique," centered his definition of a gang on its natural history, those characteristics that made it unique and distinct from other "types of collectives" (p. 37). His list of definitional characteristics included (a) a spontaneous and unplanned origin, (b) intimate face-to-face relations, (c) a sense of organization, solidarity, and morale that is superior to that exhibited by the mob, (d) a tendency to move through space and meet a hostile element, which can precipitate cooperative, planned conflict, a morale-boosting activity in itself, (e) the creation of a shared esprit de

corps and a common tradition or "heritage of memories," and (f) a propensity for some geographic area or territory, which it will defend through force if necessary (Thrasher, 1927/1963, pp. 36-46). Nowhere in his definition, however, does Thrasher mention delinquent or law-violating behavior as a criterion for a gang. Certainly, he acknowledged that the criminal gang was one type, but he also stressed that among his 1,313 gangs were some that were good and some that were bad (Thrasher, 1927/1963, pp. 47-62; see also Bursik & Grasmick, 1993).

Almost 50 years after Thrasher, Klein (1971) argued persuasively for the self-definition of gang members: a gang is "any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies" (p. 428). As Bursik and Grasmick (1993) have further noted, the first two criteria are easily met by a number of social groups, including Greek fraternities and, we might add, Greek sororities, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and Police Athletic League members, among others. Even if the fraternities identified by Bursik and Grasmick exhibited the third quality and enjoyed a "dangerous" reputation on campus, they would not, in all likelihood, come to the attention of the law enforcement community's groups that target gangs. The qualitative differences between how fraternities compared to street gangs fulfill the first two criteria tend to neutralize much of the behavioral element and lead to it being reclassified as "college pranks," unless, as has happened, someone is seriously injured or dies.

Ball and Curry (1995) have provided perhaps the most cogent and erudite treatment of definitional alternatives and issues surrounding the term *gang*. After engaging in a lengthy linguistic analysis of various ways to define *gang*, they proposed that "gang definitions would do better to focus on the abstract, formal characteristics of the phenomenon rather than connotative, normative content" (Ball & Curry, 1995, p. 240). In this regard, they mirrored the much earlier concerns of Short (1968), who stated, "It is clear . . . that in most cases gangs and subcultures are not coterminous and that among gang boys most delinquencies do not involve the total group . . . and the behavior of gang members is a function not only of participation in the subculture of the gang, but of other subcultures as well, e.g., social class and ethnicity associates with neighborhood residence" (p. 11).

This caveat—its early and recent versions—has generally fallen on deaf ears. Largely conceptual treatments of gangs, such as those offered by Curry

and Decker (1998), include a merger of Thrasher's (1927/1963) and Klein's (1971) elements, including being a social group, using symbols, engaging in verbal and nonverbal communications to declare their "gang-ness," a sense of permanence, gang identified territory or turf, and, lastly, crime (pp. 2-6). Maxson (1998) emphasizes that not only are adjectives often necessary to make sense of gangs, as in drug gangs and street gangs, but gangs also exhibit a remarkably fluid social structure (p. 2).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, "the terms 'wannabe,' 'core,' 'fringe,' 'associate,' 'hardcore,' and 'O.G.' (original gangster) reflect the changing levels of involvement and the fact that the boundaries of gang membership are penetrable" (Maxson, 1998, p. 2).

Quantitative data-based gang researchers continue to employ crime, and thereby Ball and Curry's (1995) connotative behavioral content, as a defining criterion. For example, Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, and Hawkins (1998) disposed of the gang question with the following: "Gang membership at ages 14 and 15 was measured by the question, 'Do you belong to a gang?' To validate gang membership, follow-up questions about the gang's name and characteristics were asked" (p. 97) (see Battin-Pearson, Thornberry, Hawkins, & Krohn, 1998).

Winfree, Fuller, Bäckström, and Mays (1992) explored the empirical utility of both parts of this procedure for defining gang membership. That is, they employed two definitions of gang membership in answering the following two-part question: What is the effect of changing the definition of gang membership on (a) the level of gang involvement and (b) the prediction of self-reported group-context offending? They reported that the self-designation method alone yielded nearly equal numbers of wannabes (i.e., youths indicating that they had been interested in joining a gang), former gang members (i.e., youths indicating that they had been involved with gangs in the past but not now), and currently active gang members (i.e., youths indicating a continuing involvement in gangs); however, a restrictive definition, such as that employed by Battin and associates (1998), revealed that most of the sample, more than 70%, were wannabes, with active gang members outnumbering former gang members two to one (Winfree et al., 1992, p. 33). They also found that the same set of predictors revealed more about self-nomination gang membership than the restrictive definition (Winfree et al., 1992, p. 35). Winfree and associates (1992) suggested three reasons for this anomaly: first, youths in "near-gangs" may feel considerable motivation to demonstrate their "gang-worthiness" by participating in group-context offending; second, the sample of "true" gang members may not include the most criminally active ones as they may not be in school; and third, those criminally active youths still in school may have absented themselves from the survey (pp. 35-

36) (see Winfree, Bäckström, & Mays, 1994). In essence, changing the definition of what constitutes a gang and membership in that gang can alter the findings even within the same sample.

### *DELINQUENCY THEORY, GANGS, AND CRITERION-RELATED VALIDATION*

The current research question comports well with a criterion-related validity check. We elected to include in the analyses variables drawn from the key constructs associated with Akers's (1985, 1994) variant of social learning theory and Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory. As Kerlinger (1973) has noted, "in criterion-related validation, which is often practical and applied research, the basic interest is usually more in the criterion, some practical outcome, than in the predictors . . . . A test high in criterion-related validity is one that helps investigators make successful decisions in assigning people to treatments, conceiving treatments broadly" (pp. 459-460). In this case, we are interested in what happens to the relationships between the theoretical variables and gang membership when we change the definition of what constitutes a *gang*. The goal, then, would be to look at the utility of such variable labels as *gang* for theorists and practitioners.

Social learning theory has logical links to gang behavior, especially given the social nature of much gang-related offending (Bjerregard & Smith, 1993; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein, 1998; Winfree et al., 1994). In particular, many social learning variables have demonstrated predictive efficacy for gang membership and gang-related delinquency, including differential associations, or the extent to which one's peers are involved in delinquent versus pro-social activities; positive and negative social reinforcers, here measured as commitment to negative peers and positive peers; and differential definitions, defined as neutralizations and perceived level of guilt for misbehavior (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Winfree, Bernat, & Esbensen, in press). Similarly, gang membership and gang-related misbehavior fit closely with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) concept of analogous behaviors, ones commonly observed in low self-control individuals (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999; Fleisher, 1998; Lynskey, Winfree, Esbensen, & Clason, 2000). Key among the self-control variables, and ones included in this analysis, are the level of parental monitoring, or the extent to which parents are aware of their children's location, activities, and friends; impulsivity, or a propensity to engage in actions without thinking through all of the consequences; and risk-seeking, a tendency to engage in actions that entail more than a modicum

of danger to the participants (Arneklev, Grasmick, Tittle, & Bursik, 1993; Gibbs & Giever, 1995; Gibbs, Giever, & Martin, 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

We are not, strictly speaking, testing either of these theories or even the specific variables included in this analysis. Rather, based on our research question, we posit tests of five different definitions of self-declared gang membership and their links to theoretical constructs. That is, we are predicting gang membership, variably defined as an either/or condition, from social learning and self-control variables. Our objectives in this research are two-fold: (a) to what extent are the prevalence and characteristics of gang members altered by varying the operational definition of youth gang membership? and (b) to what extent are theoretical concepts derived from social learning theory and self-control theory capable of distinguishing gang from nongang youth under five increasingly restrictive definitions of gang membership?

### *THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS*

The two questions posed above are of significance for both theoretical and policy relevant reasons. First, what we know about delinquency in urban areas is largely based on youth gang research; many advances in delinquency research and theory have taken gangs as their focal point (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). Consequently, it is not surprising that theory-based gang studies often employ gang membership and other group-context criminality as dependent variables. For example, Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) *Delinquency and Opportunity*, a work that introduced differential opportunity theory as an expansion of both anomie and differential association theories, was subtitled *A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*.<sup>2</sup> Citing Thrasher's work on urban gangs, Cloward and Ohlin noted that collective alternative solutions to the commonly felt problems of urban youth do not create a gang until a group of youth "becomes a conflict group." As a general rule, then, theory-based youth gang studies have begun with the assumption that for a given social group to be a gang, it must engage in some negativistic, law-violating behavior, among other things. The delinquent gang is subsequently viewed as a likely venue in which to test or develop a delinquency theory. To what extent has this definitional decision by researchers and theorists impacted the variance found in the dependent variable and, in some cases, its ties to explanatory variables?

For policy makers, the perceived need to control gangs and gang behavior has led to the passage of antigang laws and codes. Although many of these legal actions have been challenged, most have withstood the legal scrutiny of

the appellate courts. For example, persons convicted of violating the federal Criminal Street Gangs Statute (1999) can receive an additional sentence enhancement of up to 10 years. Some states, like California, have adopted sentence enhancements for persons found to have committed a felony "for the benefit of, at the direction of, or in association with any criminal street gang, with the specific intent to promote, further, or assist in any criminal conduct by gang members" (California Penal Code, 1999, section 186.22 [b][1]). In fact, "actively participating in any criminal street gang" can, by itself, result in a jail or prison sentence in California (California Penal Code, 1999, section 186.22[a]). As a further example of legislation intended to control gang members, Illinois statutorily denies probation to persons convicted of forcible felonies if the offenses were related to the activities of organized gangs.<sup>3</sup> Given the lack of consensus about what constitutes gang membership, is it viable to implement policies that subject individuals to criminal justice processing due to their alleged gang status?

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### *Site Selection and Sample*

During Spring 1995, eighth-grade students in 11 cities—Las Cruces (NM), Omaha (NE), Phoenix (AZ), Philadelphia (PA), Kansas City (MO), Milwaukee (WI), Orlando (FL), Will County (IL), Providence (RI), Pocatello (ID), and Torrance (CA)—completed self-administered questionnaires as part of the National Evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999). The final sample consisted of 5,935 eighth-grade public-school students, representing 42 schools and 315 classrooms. Passive parental consent, in which excluded students were those whose parents did not want their children participating, was used at all sites except one. Torrance relied on active consent, in which parents had to return signed permission forms for their children. Participation rates, or the percentage of children providing answers to the questionnaires, varied between 98% and 100% at the passive consent sites. At the four active consent schools, the participation rates varied from a low of 53% to a high of 75% (Esbensen et al., 1997). Comparison of school district data indicates that the study sample is representative of eighth-grade students enrolled in public schools in these 11 communities.

This public school-based sample has the standard limitations associated with school-based surveys, such as exclusion of private school students, exclusion of truants, sick, and/or tardy students, and the potential underrepre-



sentation of high-risk youth. With this caveat in mind, the current sample is composed of nearly all eighth-grade students in attendance on the days questionnaires were administered in these 11 jurisdictions. The sample includes primarily 13- to 15-year-old students attending public schools in a broad cross-section of communities across the continental United States. This is not a random sample and strong generalizations cannot be made to the adolescent population as a whole. However, students from these 11 jurisdictions do represent the following types of communities: large urban areas with a majority of students belonging to a racial or ethnic minority (Philadelphia, Phoenix, Milwaukee, and Kansas City), medium-sized cities (population ranges between 100,000 and 500,000) with considerable racial and/or ethnic heterogeneity (Providence and Orlando), medium-sized cities with a majority of White students but a substantial minority enrollment (Omaha and Torrance), a small city (fewer than 100,000 inhabitants) with an ethnically diverse student population (Las Cruces), a small, racially homogeneous (i.e., White) city (Pocatello), and a rural community in which more than 80% of the student population is White (Will County). Such a sample is appropriate to the prototypical prevention approach exemplified by GREAT, which addresses a social problem through a simple intervention delivered to the broadest possible population, rather than concentrating a more intensive program on a smaller high-risk population. Furthermore, Maxson and Klein (1994) and Curry et al. (1996) document that gangs are not exclusively an urban phenomenon, as is often suggested. They report that gangs also exist in communities with populations of less than 25,000. According to the 1995 National Youth Gang Survey, law enforcement agencies in nine of the sites represented in this study reported active youth gangs in their jurisdictions during 1995 (National Youth Gang Center, 1997).

### *Measures*

#### GANG DEFINITION

Our primary purpose in this article is to examine the criterion-related validity of the self-nomination technique of gang membership. We explore this issue by assessing the effect of five different definitions on attitudes and behaviors. Self-report studies rely on respondent self-identification of gang membership, similar to police reliance on gang members "claiming" affiliation. Just as the police often require additional criteria to be met (i.e., using gang signs, wearing colors, and associating with known gang members), self-report surveys often include follow-up questions that provide confirmation of gang affiliation. In the current study, respondents were asked two filter

questions: "Have you ever been a gang member?" and "Are you now in a gang?" These two questions provide our first two levels of gang membership.

Three increasingly more restrictive definitions of gang membership were then created. Although there is some disagreement concerning inclusion of illegal activity as a requisite for gang membership (Ball & Curry, 1995; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Short, 1968), it is our position that participation in criminal activity is a key element that distinguishes youth gangs from other youth groups. As such, aside from self-nomination, our first criterion for designation as a delinquent gang member was for the respondent to indicate that their gang was involved in at least one of the following illegal activities: getting in fights with other gangs, stealing things, robbing other people, stealing cars, selling marijuana, selling other illegal drugs, or damaging property.

The next criterion required gang members to indicate that their gang had some level of organization. Specifically, the survey respondents were asked if the following described their gang: "there are initiation rites, the gang has established leaders, the gang has symbols or colors." An affirmative response to all three of these descriptors led to designation as an "organized gang" member.

The last criterion used to determine gang membership was an indicator of whether individuals considered themselves a core member or a peripheral member. This classification was determined by their response to the following instructions. A five-ringed concentric circle (i.e., a target) was drawn on the chalkboard and students were asked to think of the circle as their gang and to indicate "how far from the center of the gang are you?" Those students indicating they were in the inner two circles were classified as "core," whereas those indicating they were in circles 3 through 5 were classified as "peripheral" members (see Appendix A for a listing of the five definitions).

#### DEMOGRAPHIC, ATTITUDINAL, AND BEHAVIORAL MEASURES

Demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral measures were obtained from students completing the self-administered questionnaires. Responses to five questions describe the demographic composition of our sample and allow for comparisons of gang and nongang youth. Students provided the following background information:

- their sex;
- family structure (i.e., do they live with both their mother and father [including step-parents], with only their mother, with only their father, or some other situation);
- their race (White, African American, Hispanic, Asian, or other);
- their age; and

- the highest level of schooling completed by their mother and father.

Attitudinal measures used in these analyses are representative of social learning theory and self-control theory. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this sample, we do not attempt to conduct theory testing, but we do use theoretical concepts to explore the relationship between gang membership and indicators of these two theoretical perspectives. Indicators of self-control theory include the following: parental monitoring, impulsivity, and risk-seeking. Social learning theory is represented by the following measures: delinquent peers, pro-social peers, commitment to negative peers, commitment to positive peers, neutralization (tolerance of fighting under specified situations), and perceived guilt. Unless otherwise indicated, the scales (which are described in more detail in Appendix B) were adapted from the National Youth Survey (Elliott, Ageton, & Huizinga, 1985) or the Denver Youth Survey (Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991).

We also obtained measures of self-reported delinquency and drug use. Students were provided a list of 17 behaviors and 5 different drugs and then asked to indicate if they had ever committed the act or used the drug. If the students answered yes, they were asked to indicate how many times they had engaged in the behavior during the past 12 months. In addition to a general delinquency measure, we created five subscales of behavior: status offenses, minor offenses, property offenses, crimes against person, and drug sales (items included in these subscales are listed in Appendix B).

## RESULTS

### *Bivariate Analyses*

The demographic composition of gangs using the five different definitions of gang affiliation is reported in Table 1. A total of 4,773 (82.6%) respondents indicated that they had never been in a gang, whereas 994 (16.8% of the sample) answered yes to the question of ever having been a gang member. In columns 3 and 4 (identified as Gang 1 and Gang 2), we distinguish between those youth who reported ever being in a gang from those who reported current gang membership (522 or 8.8% of the sample). Likewise, under the remaining three columns, we include those youth who no longer fit the increasingly restrictive criteria as nongang members. Of primary importance is to highlight the degree to which prevalence estimates of gang membership are an artifact of measurement. In this sample, the prevalence of gang membership could be said to be any one of the following: 17% based on the "ever"

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Gang Members

	Total Sample N = 5935	Gang 1		Gang 2		Gang 3		Gang 4		Gang 5	
		Never in Gang n = 4773	Ever in Gang n = 483	Now in Gang n = 522	Non- Gang n = 502	Delinquent Gang n = 467	Non- Gang n = 692	Organized Delinquent n = 275	Non- Gang n = 827	Core Gang n = 137	
Age (M)	13.8	13.8	14	14.1	14	14.1	14.1	14.1	14	14.1	14
Gender (%) <sup>*</sup>											
Male	48	45	59	63	59	63	63	60	61	62	54
Female	52	55	41	37	41	37	37	40	39	38	46
Race (%) <sup>*</sup>											
White	41	44	26	24	25	24	24	27	24	24	30
Black	27	25	30	31	30	31	31	28	32	32	23
Hispanic	19	17	30	25	30	25	25	25	29	28	22
Other	14	14	15	19	15	20	20	20	16	16	25
Family structure (%) <sup>*</sup>											
Single	31	30	35	41	35	41	41	41	36	41	40
Intact	62	64	56	47	55	46	46	46	53	46	46
Other	7	6	10	13	10	13	13	13	11	13	15
Parents' education (%) <sup>*</sup>											
< high school	10	9	13	16	13	17	17	15	14	14	18
High school	24	24	27	27	28	27	27	26	28	28	24
> high school	66	68	60	57	60	57	57	59	58	58	57

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .01$ . All chi-square tests comparing gang youth with those never in a gang are statistically significant.

gang member question; 9% according to the "current" gang member question; 8% are "delinquent" gang members; slightly less than 5% are "organized" gang members; and only 2% are "core" gang members.

The second column in Table 1 reveals that 45% of those youth who had never been in a gang were male, 44% were White, 30% lived in single parent homes, and 68% reported that at least one of their parents had more than a high school education (i.e., attended some college or more). Compared to the "never in gang" youth, all five definitions of gang member status indicate that gang members are more likely to be male (ranging from 54% male in the most restrictive definition to 63% male under the less restrictive gang definitions). Gang members are also more likely to be a racial or ethnic minority, to live in single parent homes, and to have parents who have not graduated from high school. Contrary to what we had expected, the most restrictive definition did not produce a picture of gang members that was more consistent with law enforcement data than was the least restrictive definition. That is, the core gang members, relative to the "ever" gang members, were not more likely to be male or members of racial and ethnic minorities, a finding inconsistent with law enforcement-based surveys.

In Table 2, we report the mean scores for both gang and nongang youths on the self-control and social learning measures. Here we see that the gang members reported increasingly lower levels of parental monitoring with each new restriction to gang membership. And, in each instance, the gang members' perceptions of parental monitoring were statistically significantly different from the nongang members. The same pattern holds for each theoretical construct. As the definition of gang membership becomes increasingly more restrictive, the expressed attitudes of the gang members become increasingly more antisocial. That is, gang members are more impulsive, engage in more risk-seeking behavior, have more delinquent friends, have fewer pro-social peers, report less perceived guilt, have a greater tendency to view fighting as appropriate behavior, are more committed to delinquent peers, and are less committed to positive peers. In short, as the definition of gang membership takes on more characteristics of the media image of an organized, delinquent street gang, the members express more antisocial attitudes.

The same pattern evidenced with respect to attitudes is reflected in behavioral self-reports. With each increasingly restrictive definition, the gang members reported greater participation in illegal activity. For example, whereas the mean number of crimes committed against persons for the youth who were never in a gang was 0.60, those youth who were currently core members of a delinquent youth gang reported committing an average of 3.69 (six times as many) crimes against persons. For each of these self-report

TABLE 2: *t* Tests of Attitudinal Variables by Gang Membership

	Total Sample	Gang 1		Gang 2		Gang 3		Gang 4		Gang 5	
		Never in Gang	Ever in Gang	Now in Gang	Non-Gang	Delinquent Gang	Non-Gang	Organized Delinquent	Non-Gang	Core Gang	
Self-control theory											
Parental monitoring	3.72	3.82	3.49	3.16	3.49	3.12	3.39	3.13	3.36	3.01	
Impulsivity	2.85	2.76	3.05	3.25	3.05	3.25	3.1	3.3	3.12	3.39	
Risk-seeking	3.06	2.95	3.41	3.7	3.4	3.74	3.47	3.79	3.5	3.92	
Social learning theory											
Guilt	2.31	2.42	2.03	1.66	2.03	1.63	1.93	1.6	1.89	1.54	
Commitment to negative peers	2.4	2.23	2.71	3.5	2.71	3.54	2.94	3.52	3.01	3.7	
Commitment to positive peers	3.8	3.93	3.54	3.04	3.53	2.99	3.38	3.01	3.34	2.95	
Neutralization, fight	3.98	3.85	4.36	4.66	4.36	4.7	4.46	4.72	4.49	4.75	
Pro-social peers	2.97	3.08	2.68	2.36	2.68	2.34	2.6	2.3	2.57	2.23	
Delinquent peers	2	1.82	2.43	3.1	2.43	3.19	2.59	3.27	2.68	3.4	

NOTE: All *t* tests of the attitudinal variables by gang membership are statistically significant at the .01 level: never in gang/nongang in each gang definition, never in gang/gang in each gang definition, nongang/gang in each gang definition.

TABLE 3: *t* Tests of Behavioral Variables by Gang Membership

	Total Sample M	Gang 1		Gang 2		Gang 3		Gang 4		Gang 5	
		Never in Gang M	Ever in Gang M	Now in Gang M	Non Gang M	Delinquent Gang M	Non Gang M	Organized Delinquent M	Non Gang M	Core Gang M	
Status offenses	1.92	1.47	3.21	5.14	3.22	5.42	3.75	5.56	3.95	5.94	
Minor offenses	1.31	0.92	2.25	4.08	2.22	4.32	2.8	4.2	3.01	4.37	
Property offenses	0.83	0.57	1.29	2.93	1.27	3.09	1.72	3.14	1.9	3.37	
Personal offenses	0.82	0.6	1.21	2.65	1.2	2.85	1.52	3.13	1.67	3.69	
Drug sale	0.5	0.21	0.86	3.16	0.83	3.52	1.36	3.89	1.6	4.79	
Drug use	1.29	0.92	2.23	4.07	2.23	4.24	2.69	4.41	2.86	5.06	
Delinquency, total	0.99	0.67	1.67	3.52	1.66	3.76	2.14	3.92	2.32	4.41	

NOTE: All three-way *t* tests of the behavioral variables by gang membership are statistically significant at the .01 level: never in gang/nongang in each gang definition, never in gang/gang in each gang definition, nongang/gang in each gang definition.

subscales, the ratio of offending for core gang members and never gang members ranged from 4:1 for status offenses to 22:1 for drug sales (see Table 3).

### *Multivariate Analyses*

To examine the extent to which demographic characteristics and attitudes can predict gang membership, we conducted a series of logistic regression analyses. Step-wise forward inclusion procedures were used to identify the relative predictive power of demographic variables and the indicators of social learning and self-control theories. For parsimony, we report only the final models for each gang definition in Table 4. One notable observation is that the effect of demographic variables becomes less important with each increasingly restrictive definition. Whereas all but the family structure variable were significant in the ever gang member definition, none of the demographic characteristics was statistically significant in the full model predicting core gang membership.

These summary models highlight the importance of peers (both having delinquent peers and expressing a commitment to negative peers) and of attitudes about right and wrong (perceptions of guilt and tolerance of fighting). Importantly, it is exposure to delinquent peers that is vital, not association with pro-social peers. In each model, the delinquent activity of the peer group was predictive of gang membership. Battin et al. (1998), in an examination of the simultaneous effects of gang membership and delinquent peers on both self-reported and court-reported delinquency, noted that gang membership "contributed directly to delinquency and substance use above and beyond association with delinquent peers" (p. 106). Thus, it is not simply a case that the variable representations for delinquent peers and gangs are measuring the same thing. Having delinquent peers and belonging to a gang are two different states; however, the former would appear to be predictive of the latter. As noted by Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), among others (Cairns & Cairns, 1991; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993), aggressive and delinquent youth and youth who have shown a propensity to enjoy the company of like-minded youth, are more likely to become gang youth.

In addition to peer variables, the variables that are most predictive of gang membership are the respondents' perceptions of guilt and the degree to which they indicate that fighting is an appropriate response in specific situations. To measure guilt, respondents were asked to indicate how guilty they would feel if they engaged in one of 16 different delinquent acts (corresponding to those included in the self-report inventory). Acceptance of physical violence as a suitable response to conflict was measured by three questions tapping the



**TABLE 4: Predicting Gang Membership: Logistic Regression Analysis**

	Ever in Gang			Now in Gang			Delinquent Gang			Organized Delinquent			Core Gang		
	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)
<b>Demographics</b>															
Age	0.26*	0.06	1.3	0.26*	0.08	1.29	0.26*	0.09	1.31	0.1	0.09	1.1	-0.08	0.1	0.92
Female	-0.29*	0.09	0.75	-0.24	0.12	0.78	-0.17	0.13	0.84	0.07	0.15	1.08	0.34	0.2	1.4
<b>Race</b>															
Black	0.68*	0.12	1.98	0.64*	0.16	1.9	0.65*	0.17	1.91	0.16	0.21	1.18	-0.03	0.28	0.98
Hispanic	0.93*	0.12	2.54	0.65*	0.16	1.92	0.64*	0.17	1.89	0.35	0.2	1.41	0.13	0.26	1.13
Other	0.88*	0.13	2.42	0.93*	0.18	2.53	0.86*	0.19	2.35	0.60*	0.22	1.82	0.63	0.27	1.88
<b>Family</b>															
Single parent	0.09	0.1	1.1	0.33*	0.13	1.4	0.33*	0.13	1.4	0.39	0.16	1.47	0.32	0.21	1.37
Other	0.34	0.16	1.41	0.46	0.2	1.58	0.48	0.21	1.62	0.52	0.25	1.68	0.65	0.31	1.92
<b>Social learning</b>															
Neutral fight	0.42*	0.06	1.52	0.60*	0.1	1.35	0.61*	0.11	1.85	0.61*	0.14	1.84	0.65*	0.2	1.91
Delinquent peers	0.58*	0.06	1.79	0.71*	0.08	2.03	0.80*	0.08	2.24	0.80*	0.1	2.22	0.79*	0.13	2.21
Pro-social peers	-0.04	0.07	0.94	-0.03	0.09	0.97	0.01	0.1	1.01	0.01	0.12	1.01	0.01	0.15	1.01
<b>Commitment to</b>															
negative peers	0.15*	0.04	1.16	0.33*	0.06	1.39	0.33*	0.06	1.38	0.18*	0.07	1.19	0.16	0.1	1.18
Commitment to															
positive peers	-0.02	0.04	0.98	-0.05	0.05	0.95	-0.06	0.06	0.94	0.01	0.07	1.01	0.02	0.09	1.02
Guilt	-0.77*	0.1	0.46	-0.91*	0.14	0.4	-0.93*	0.15	0.39	-1.03*	0.19	0.36	-1.03*	0.27	0.36
<b>Self-control</b>															
Impulsivity	0.06	0.07	1.06	0.09	0.09	1.1	0.03	0.09	1.03	0.14	0.11	1.15	0.14	0.14	1.15
<b>Parental</b>															
monitoring	-0.04	0.06	0.96	-0.04	0.07	0.96	-0.08	0.08	0.92	-0.03	0.09	0.97	-0.02	0.12	0.98
Risk-seeking	0.04	0.06	1.05	-0.09	0.08	0.92	-0.06	0.09	0.95	-0.04	0.1	0.96	0.06	0.14	1.06
<b>Model <math>\chi^2</math></b>	1227.08*			1057.42*			1040.29*			617.71*			350.11*		
Degree of freedom	16			16			16			16			16		
Nagelkerke $R^2$	0.344			0.397			0.414			0.341			0.306		

\*  $p < .01$ .

appropriateness of getting in a physical fight if, for example, someone was threatening to hurt friends or family. As seen in the bivariate analyses (Table 2), the core gang members had a mean of 1.54 on the 3-point guilt scale (with 1 indicating *not at all guilty* and 3 representing *very guilty*) compared to a mean of 2.42 for those never in a gang. For the neutralization to fighting measure, the core gang members averaged a score of 4.75 on a 5-point scale (5 indicates *strongly agree*), whereas those youth who reported never being in a gang averaged 3.85. These latter two findings comport well with the general discussion of normative saliency for social deviance (Krohn, Akers, Radosevich, & Lanza-Kaduce, 1982; Sellers, Winfree, & Griffiths, 1993), and that concept's link to social learning theory's differential definitions (Akers, 1985). As we report, gang members, youth who have been shown by other researchers to be more violent and delinquency-engaged than other comparable youth, even delinquents (Howell, 1998, pp. 8-11; Huff, 1998; Thornberry & Burch, 1997), exhibit lower perceptions of guilt and greater tolerance for physical violence.

## DISCUSSION

So what have we learned? When is a gang a gang, and why does it matter? These questions result in somewhat different answers for researchers, theorists, and policy makers. For researchers, it is important to refine measurement: to assess the validity and reliability of the measures being used. For theorists, it is important to better understand factors associated with gang membership and associated behaviors, whether testing or constructing theory. For policy makers, it is important to know the extent and nature of the gang problem to allow for development of appropriate policies and programs. Clearly, the primary domains of interest for theorists, researchers, and policy makers are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, are closely intertwined.

Considerable debate has centered around the attributes that constitute a gang and the criteria necessary to classify someone a gang member. Miller (1980), Klein (1995), Short (1996), Spengel (1995), and others have been engaged in this debate for three decades with little success in resolving their differences. Of particular concern in this debate have been the following questions: Is involvement in delinquent activity a prerequisite for classifying a youth group a gang? Must a youth group possess some level of organizational structure to be classified as a gang? Are self-nomination techniques valid measures of gang membership? and Are core members more antisocial than peripheral gang members? We are not presumptuous enough to suggest that we can accomplish what has eluded others. However, with the data at

hand, we have been able to undertake analyses of a large, although limited, sample of young adolescents that contribute new insights to this debate. We turn first to a discussion of the gang member issues prior to consideration of the gang definition concerns.

In one way or another, gang research, as well as law enforcement classification of gang activity, has relied on self-nomination (i.e., "claiming") of gang members. That is, if a person has claimed to be a gang member, that has been adequate grounds for inclusion in a study of gangs or for special prosecution by the justice system. To what extent is such a crude measure a valid predictor of gang membership? Our findings lend credence to the continued reliance on this technique that is often summarized by the following colloquialism: "If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it is a duck." The largest observed differences in attitudes and behaviors are those found in comparing youths who reported never having been gang members and those who reported prior gang involvement. Whatever it is that this one question captures, the respondents clearly reacted to the stimulus and the gang members reported substantially more antisocial attitudes and behaviors than the nongang youths. As additional restrictions were placed on the criteria necessary for classification as a gang member, the attitudes and behaviors of the gang members became increasingly more antisocial, with the relatively small sample of core gang members manifesting the most extreme responses.

So, if a person claims gang affiliation, what does this mean? What is a gang? Our methodological approach does not allow a direct response to this question. However, we can address this question indirectly by filtering respondents out of the gang based on the conceptual criteria identified by researchers and theorists as requisites for gang status. As discussed above, the simple question "Have you ever been a gang member?" was understood by the respondents in such a manner that one can surmise that there exists a shared understanding of what this term means, not only by former and current gang members, but also by nongang youth. Does the imposition of conceptually determined criteria alter the size, composition, or characteristics of the gang? Exclusion of current gang youth who did indicate their gang was involved in delinquent activity resulted in elimination of 55 (11%) of the 522 current gang members and only minimal change in the reported attitudes and behaviors. Further reduction in the size of the gang sample and expression of more negative attitudes and behaviors were produced with the additional criterion that the gang possess organizational components. Clearly, conceptually based definitions of gang membership have significant ramifications for estimates about the size of the gang problem and for descriptions of the attitudes and behaviors of gang members. However, personal characteristics (i.e., sex, age, race) remain relatively stable, regardless of definition.

From a research perspective, we can conclude that the self-nomination technique is a particularly robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from nongang youth. The magnitude of the gang problem, as measured by prevalence rates of gang membership, varies substantially (from a high of 16.8% when using the ever gang member question to 2.3% for delinquent, organized core gang members), but the demographic characteristics of the gang members remain relatively stable across definitions. Likewise, whereas the filtering (i.e., exclusion of respondents not meeting the restricted definition) process results in an increasingly more anti-social gang member, as reflected in reported attitudes and behaviors, the largest difference is between the never gang and the ever gang youth.

From a theoretical perspective, what is the relevance of our findings? With a broad definition of gangs and gang membership, we are left with the impression that demographic characteristics are significant predictors (older, male, and minority youth) of gang membership. However, as we invoke conceptual restrictions on those youth claiming gang status, the theoretical predictors from social learning theory (especially association with delinquent peers, perceptions of guilt, and neutralizations for fighting) supersede the importance of demographic characteristics.

The varying prevalence estimates of gang membership and the changes in attitudes and behavior have distinct policy relevance. Obviously, the definition used greatly affects the perceived magnitude of the gang problem. By restricting gang membership status to gangs that are involved in delinquent activity and have some level of organization, we reduce the size of the gang problem substantially. A similar finding was recently discovered in the law-enforcement estimates provided to the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). In its 1998 survey, the NYGC included a restricted definition for the survey respondents to use. Analyses incorporating this restricted definition indicate that earlier NYGC estimates may have overestimated the number of youth gangs in the United States by 35% and the number of youth gang members by 43% (Klein, personal correspondence). In terms of resource allocation, not to mention public hysteria, such definitional issues assume considerable importance.

From a policy perspective, the validity of the self-nomination method lends credence to the police practice of targeting youth who claim gang affiliation. However, caution needs to be exercised. Although it is the case that the largest distinction in this study is that between those youths who claim to never have been a gang member and those who claim gang affiliation at some time, it is vital to note that those gang members who no longer claim gang status are substantially more pro-social in both attitudes and behavior than are those persisting in their membership, a finding consistent with longitudinal

results from the Denver and Rochester studies (e.g., Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993). Law enforcement, therefore, should be encouraged to remove former members from their gang lists.

Additional policy issues surround responses to youth gangs. Civil injunctions, antiloitering statutes, and sentence enhancements aimed at gang members may be too encompassing of their targeted audience. Whereas some of these approaches have received legal support (e.g., sentencing enhancements), others have failed to receive judicial backing (e.g., Chicago's Gang Congregation Ordinance). Given the permeability of gang membership, policies linking legal action to an individual's perceived status may erroneously criminalize that individual. As such, we suggest that legislation targeting gang status should be discouraged in favor of legislation focused on actual behavior.

#### APPENDIX A: Gang Definitions

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**GANG 1:** Have you ever been a gang member?

**GANG 2:** Are you now a gang member?

**GANG 3:** Are you now a gang member? and

Does your gang do any of the following things? (Yes to at least one)

- get in fights with other gangs?
- steal things?
- rob other people?
- steal cars?
- sell marijuana?
- sell other illegal drugs?
- damage or destroy property?

**GANG 4:** Current gang member and gang is delinquent

Do the following describe your gang? (Yes to all three)

- there are initiation rites
- the gang has established leader
- the gang has symbols and colors

**GANG 5:** Current gang member, gang is delinquent, and has organizational aspects  
Self-identification as a "core" member.

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#### APPENDIX B: Attitudinal Measures and Summary Scale Characteristics

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Unless otherwise indicated, these measures were adopted from the National Youth Survey (Elliott et al., 1985) or the Denver Youth Survey (Huizinga et al., 1991).

**Parental Monitoring:** Four items measuring communication with parents about activities, e.g., "My parents know who I am with if I am not at home."

Scale Mean = 3.72

Scale Standard Deviation = .81

Alpha = .74

**Risk Seeking** (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993): Four items about risk-taking behavior, e.g., "Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it."

Scale Mean = 3.06      Scale Standard Deviation = .94      Alpha = .82

**Impulsivity** (Grasmick et al., 1993): Four items measuring impulsive behavior, e.g., "I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think."

Scale Mean = 2.85      Scale Standard Deviation = .74      Alpha = .63

**Commitment to Negative Peers**: Three questions such as "If your friends were getting you in trouble at home, how likely is it that you would still hang out with them?"

Scale Mean = 2.40      Scale Standard Deviation = 1.14      Alpha = .84

**Commitment to Positive Peers**: Two questions such as "If your friends told you not to do something because it was against the law, how likely is it that you would listen to them?"

Scale Mean = 3.80      Scale Standard Deviation = 1.12      Alpha = .77

**Neutralization**: Three items tapping the respondent's belief that it is okay to get in physical fights if extenuating factors are present. For instance, "It's okay to get in a physical fight with someone if they hit you first."

Scale Mean = 3.98      Scale Standard Deviation = .97      Alpha = .83

**Guilt**: 16 questions asking how guilty the youth would feel if they did such things as "hit someone with the idea of hurting them" or "using alcohol."

Scale Mean = 2.31      Scale Standard Deviation = .56      Alpha = .94

**Positive Peer Behavior**: Eight items about the kinds of pro-social things in which friends are involved.

Scale Mean = 2.97      Scale Standard Deviation = .80      Alpha = .84

**Negative Peer Behavior**: 16 items about illegal activities in which the friends are involved.

Scale Mean = 1.99      Scale Standard Deviation = .86      Alpha = .94

**Status Offenses**: Skipped classes without an excuse. Lied about your age to get into someplace or to buy something.

**Minor Offenses**: Avoided paying for things such as movies, bus, or subway rides. Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you.

**Property Offenses**: Stole or tried to steal something worth less than \$50. Stole or tried to steal something worth more than \$50. Went into or tried to go into a building to steal something. Stole or tried to steal a motor vehicle.

**Crimes Against Person**: Hit someone with the idea of hurting them. Attacked someone with a weapon. Used a weapon or force to get money or things from people. Shot at someone because you were told to by someone else.

**Drug Sales**: Sold marijuana. Sold other illegal drugs such as heroin, cocaine, crack, or LSD.

**Drug Use**: Used tobacco products. Used alcohol. Used marijuana. Used paint, glue, or other things you inhale to get high. Other illegal drugs.

**Total Delinquency:** A summary index consisting of the preceding 14 items and 3 additional items: Have been involved in gang fights; avoided paying for things such as movies, bus, or subway rides; lied about your age to get into someplace or to buy something.

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## NOTES

1. Also, as previously observed, Howell (1998), in his overview of the American gang scene, notes that most researchers use the terms *youth gangs* and *gangs* interchangeably, although the latter term has many other uses in which youth are only tangentially involved.

2. Cohen's (1955) *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* introduced his reaction formation theory, another gang-based exploration of general juvenile delinquency from a more social psychological perspective. It is interesting that Cohen defines the behavior of gangs—delinquent subcultures—as nonutilitarian, malicious, and negativistic (pp. 27-29). In so doing, Cohen also relies on Thrasher's earlier work and the research of Shaw and McKay (1942), the latter work playing an important role in explaining gang delinquency's versatility, or gang members's willingness to get involved in a wide variety of antisocial and illegal activities. Unlike Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) *Delinquency and Opportunity*, *Delinquent Boys* is long on theory and short on empirical proof.

3. Before July 1, 1994, an organized gang was defined as "an association of 5 or more persons, with an established hierarchy, that encourages members of the association to perpetrate crimes or provides support to the members of the association who do commit crimes" (Illinois Compiled Statutes Annotated, 1999, Chapter 730, Section 5-5-3[c][2][J]). After July 1, 1994, "'Streetgang' or 'gang' or 'organized gang' or 'criminal street gang' means any combination, confederation, alliance, network, conspiracy, understanding, or other similar conjoining, in law or in fact, of 3 or more persons with an established hierarchy that, through its membership or through the agency of any member engages in a course or pattern of criminal activity" (Illinois Compiled Statutes Annotated, 1999, Chapter 730, Section 5-5-3[c][2][J]).

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