

An examination of participation in gangs through the criminological theories



In areas of high crime, especially those with low socioeconomic rates, gangs assert control over cities through installing fear of their violent crimes in community residents. Granted that most offending reaches a peak in the ages 17-25, the majority of a gang's members participate in the early years of their lives. This paper seeks to explore why individuals turn to gangs and criminal activity instead of following conventional society through the examination of the criminological theories.

Robert Merton's strain theory explains that the social structure of American society limits the number of legitimate means through which a person can gain success, which creates strain and produces an intense pressure for deviance. The American dream of material success and stability encourages citizens to work toward goals they are not always able to obtain when considering factors such as a person's beginning economic status, race, gender, etc. Individuals born into impoverished areas are nevertheless encouraged to obtain the American dream; when conventional means of reaching success fail as a result of institutional racism, gentrification, etc., a life of criminality promises material wealth without the conventional work of earning money. Individuals turn to gangs in order to ensure financial security or otherwise benefit monetarily while also receiving protection from other criminals or gangs in the area and a chance to prove themselves to their peers. When these individuals decide to join a gang in order to achieve success, they are often met with Cloward and Ohlin's Lower-class Subcultures. Gangs hold a form of structure for the members, even if the criminal activity of gangs is not characteristically as organized as other crime (particularly white collar); these structures embody Cloward and Ohlin's

Lower-class Subcultures. The gang members often learn the legitimate ways of the subculture through peers who have been members of the gang for a longer period of time. The member is also exposed to the gang's conflict sector – the offenses the gang uses in order to assert dominance over a community. Finally, the member will be exposed to retreated members or former members of the gang who have reverted to substance abuse as a way to cope with their inability to achieve material success through either legitimate or non-legitimate means (the gang). Without considering why material success coincides with the American dream or focusing on other aspirations (no matter how unattainable they are through conventional means), the offender settles for using criminal activity in gangs to achieve material success. As Merton's strain theory identifies the unequal distribution of opportunity for citizens in America to climb the economic ladder, Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory elaborates on areas of immense disadvantage in the socioeconomic world and provides explanations concerning seemingly disproportionate criminal offenders within certain economic statuses, races, and ethnicities.

Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory tests and expands upon Park and Burgess's concentric zone theory. The concentric zone theory (Park and Burgess) states that cities grow outward in concentric circles (or zones). This growth leads to 5 zones in which people are distributed; the second zone is of particular focus. Zone two is referred to as the zone in transition, which is typically high in crime as (lower class and minority) people are pushed toward the outside circles to create room for new business, along with those who are wealthy and established. When social disorganization results from

the growth of a city, zone two is largely affected by factors such as transiency, poverty, family disruption, rapid urban growth, and a large mix of many people. Expanding on Park and Burgess's concentric zone theory, Shaw and McKay conclude that the nature of the neighborhood, not the individual, drives a person's involvement in crime. Individuals who are driven to gang activity are equal to individuals in affluent neighborhoods without the advantages that affluent neighborhoods promise, such as tighter social controls and stability. Often under strain for material success, zone two areas lack social controls and bonds that are vital in keeping individuals from engaging in deviant behavior. When these social controls are absent, the individual continues to seek wealth, stability, and protection but disregards legitimate means of obtaining these goals, leading them to join a gang.

Through Sampson and Groves, further research on neighborhood conditions, the demographics of gangs can be further expanded on. As a result of gangs residing in impoverished areas, minorities are disproportionately affected by their violence and more enticed to seek refuge with criminal activity. Gender and race are miniscule factors in the schematics of gangs, which are largely determined by societal factors of institutional racism and gentrification. In efforts to assert dominance over the changes happening throughout the zone in transition during times of city growth, individuals join gangs with the hopes of either moving out of their impoverished state or asserting dominance over the changing community. Poverty persists as a large and debilitating presence in zone two areas which leaves individuals unsure of their financial stability or their future outside of a gang. Cities that are overwhelmed with such immense poverty and injustice often fall victim to become an area of high crime. Gangs often present a sense of belonging,

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appreciation, stability, and security that low income areas struggling to break the poverty cycle are unable to provide. The individuals who choose to participate in gang activity do so with deliberation, an understanding of possible ramifications, and an intent to benefit from their membership in the gang. The rational choice theory explains the decision behind an individual joining a gang.

The rational choice theory, which began with Beccaria in the 18th century concludes that crimes are deliberate acts, committed with the intent of benefitting the offender. While many individuals may join gangs under a feeling of pressure or hopelessness in order to gain protection in their neighborhood and financial benefits, the decision to engage in gang activity is a deliberate attempt to better the offenders circumstances. Reynolds crime pays notion supports that the benefits of joining a gang directly aid the offender and outweigh the possible ramifications of engaging in gang activity to the offender. The individual is taken into a gang culture that deems them worthy and useful; a culture that also offers them a sense of protection – from other criminals or gangs in the area, and stability – in their finances or life paths. Areas ridden with gang activity (particularly zone two areas), the offenders are born into a systematic poverty that they cannot escape – these individuals are referred to by Sampson and Groves in their further research on neighborhood conditions as the truly disadvantaged. Given these individual's economic status and age, the costs typically associated with committing crime do not always affect these offenders because they typically do not hold jobs or have demanding commitments outside of school until graduation. These individuals are members of a group that encourage

and commend them for committing crime, which counteracts conventional feelings of remorse. When the gang is viewed as family by the offender, or when the people in the group are prioritized as significant persons in the offenders life, the stigma of criminality from people closest to the offender wanes. Although the gang member's understand the punishments of the law through other gang members or perhaps through their own encounters with the law, they deem the benefits of gang membership to be higher than potential ramifications for their actions. After these offenders begin engaging in deviant behavior, they are often identified by those in their community or law enforcement as a person with criminal tendencies. The labeling theory explains the negative effects of labeling a gang member as a criminal offender.

Beginning with Becker in the 1900's, the labeling theory states that rather than diminishing criminal involvement, labeling a person as a criminal through state intervention or other social controls can deepen criminal behavior. When an individual loses their social bonds which Hirschi presented as social bonds that hinder criminal involvement (particularly delinquent involvement), and engages in deviant behavior, the offender is labeled by family members, school instructors, peers, and other social ties the offender may have had in the community. After the offender is labeled, especially by their parents, it becomes easy for them to dissociate themselves from conventional society, as they feel they have no more bonds to lose if they continue to engage in criminal behavior. If the individual continues to participate in the gangs offenses, the social bonds are further radicalized by the community -which perpetuates a cycle of recidivism and

alienation from conventional society. “ People who successfully exit criminal organizations still have to confront discrimination and are frequently stigmatized as they have to reinsert themselves into communities plagued by high levels of inequality, poverty, and social exclusion [Spence, 2004]”(Rosen et al.). Contrarily, a person engaging in deviant gang behavior can be reintegrated into society through a strengthening of their social bonds. While the labeling theory concludes that placing labels on gang members inevitably makes deterring from gang activity and a criminal life in general more challenging, a majority of gang members do retire at some point in their lives. Age-graded social control explains why young adult offenders eventually retire their criminal ways in exchange for a conventional lifestyle.

Sampson and Laub’s age-graded social control states that the dynamic course of life leads to changing social bonds that have a direct affect on offending over time. This explains the high number of youths (late teens to early twenties) in gangs. While an young adult may view joining a gang as the most effective way to ensure safety and stability, bonds with parents, the school system, peers, and romantic interests can modify a gang member’s belief that membership in a gang is the most effective way to maintain a prosperous, healthy life and encourage them to leave the gang in hopes of pursuing success through conventional means. While all of these theories have their roots in criminological history, there is still extensive research being conducted regarding gangs around the world; what causes their formation, who is susceptible to joining a gang or becoming victimized by one, and proper ways to encourage offenders to desist from gang activity.

Research regarding gangs today focuses on how factors such as the community, family, school, and peers affect gang involvement. Most gang members live in an area that has prevalent gangs and high rates of juvenile offending prior to engaging in deviant behavior. Delinquents who perform poorly in school and have low commitment to better their grades often demonstrate a higher chance of gang affiliation throughout their lives. Many delinquents participating in gang activity were older than their delinquent counterpart. (Alleyne, Emma., et al 547-568). Many of the research today works to expand upon the framework of theories that make up criminology. For example, in Sherod Thaxton's et al., examination of conditioning factors that promote criminal coping, Thaxton et al., Tests Agnews conclusions regarding conditioning effects and general strain theory. Thaxton et al. surveyed 6000 kids from the U. S. to determine whether their strains they experience such as their views on the police, their school environment, and victimization are in any way conditioned by their potential to commit crime, or a membership in a gang. They found that criminal behavior was more likely for those with a high rate of criminal coping mechanisms and gang affiliations; however their views on police, school environment, and victimization were not directly correlated with criminal behavior (Thaxton et al. 887-920). Beyond street crime, prison gang life is another factor of gang activity that must be examined in order for it to be understood or corrected. Emma Alleyne et al. worked to link psychological factors such as an individual's attachment to social status, social dominance, and a disdain for authority to a increased likelihood to participate in prison gangs while incarcerated. Individual delinquency and previous history engaging in group crime also played a role in determining the probability of a person to

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participate in prison gangs (Wood, et al. 203-211). Although many gang offenders become repeat offenders, eventually nearly all gang members desist. Pyrooz et al., worked to examine the process of an individual's decision to leave a gang, regarding their personal reason for leaving the gang as well as their personal approach to leaving the gang. By interviewing 84 juveniles in Arizona, Pyrooz et al., found that motives for leaving were separated into the push and pull factors. The push factors were internal and the pull factors were external. The approach of the offender leaving the gang was also separated into two categories: hostile and non hostile. Push motives and non-hostile approaches were the two most common answers in the survey. Supporting the age-crime curve, many individuals who chose to leave the gang did so without violence and no members who chose to leave for external reasons had violent encounters. Although criminal activity decreased after leaving the gang, not all criminal activity was stopped among the participants (Pyrooz et al., 417-425). After choosing to leave the gang, the offender is faced with the obstacle of reintegrating into society. Rosen et al., uses 24 interviews with former El Salvadorian gang members who went through rehabilitation programs to work to identify who benefits from the rehabilitation programs the most. Most offenders in the interviews were young, minority males with low economic statuses. Paired with community discrimination, convicted offenders struggled to find decent paying jobs after leaving the gang, which makes recidivism to gang life a probable outcome for many offenders (Rosen et al., 4758-4775).

Through the frameworks of the criminological theories and the present day research Merton's strain theory best explains why individuals choose to join

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gangs in order to support their lifestyles. However, the strain theory best supports individual's seeking refuge from their circumstances through gangs with the support from other criminological theories such as rational choice theory, Shaw and McKay's test of Burgesses concentric zones, and Sampson and Laub's age-graded social control.

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