

# GANG INVOLVEMENT AND DELINQUENCY IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL POPULATION\*

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The relationship between self-reported gang involvement and self-reported delinquency has been confirmed in a number of studies. However, there have been fewer studies of the relationship between self-reported gang involvement and officially recorded delinquency. This article examines variation in self-reported gang involvement, operationalized as three distinct categories—no involvement, gang involvement but not membership, and gang membership—and its relation to both self-reported and officially recorded delinquency for a population of middle school youths.

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The relationship between self-reported gang membership and self-reported delinquency has been widely reported by researchers and repeatedly substantiated by empirical research (Spergel, 1990). This body of research has consistently found a positive correlation between self-reported gang membership and self-reported delinquency (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Fagan, 1990; Howell, 1994; Huff, 1996; Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993). Similarly, the relationship between self-reported delinquency and officially recorded delinquency (Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse 1987; Farrington, 1989; Hartstone & Hansen, 1984; Hawkins et al., 1998) has been systematically explored. The relationship between gang membership and officially recorded delinquency has not been studied as thoroughly, however.

In the past decade, a considerable body of new evidence has been produced in support of this relationship. Using samples of high school students and dropouts from Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego, Fagan (1989, 1990) found that youths who identified themselves as gang members had higher levels of self-reported delinquent behavior than did their nongang counterparts. From the longitudinal Denver Youth Survey, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) concluded that gang members self-report two to three times as much delinquency as do nongang members. In a comparable longitudinal study for a representative sample of Rochester, New York, youths, Thornberry et al. (1993) reported that gang-involved youths were significantly more likely to report involvement in violence and other forms of delinquency. By following youths over time, the Rochester researchers revealed that gang membership is a transitional process, with delinquent activity increasing during periods of self-reported gang membership and declining afterward. In another analysis of the Rochester data, Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) found that self-reported gang members were twice as likely to report carrying firearms and three times as likely to report selling drugs.

Using longitudinal data on a sample of Seattle youths, Battin et al. (1998) discovered that gang members reported significantly more acts of violence and general delinquency than did nongang members. The researchers determined that differences in self-reported delinquency were also reflected in juvenile court reports of delinquency. In addition, they controlled for differences in having delinquent friends to reveal that gang membership is associated with delinquency above and beyond the propensity to have delinquent friends (see also, Thornberry, 1998).

Despite this research, several important questions remain about the relationship between gang membership and delinquency. The first has to do with levels of membership. It is clear that operationalizing gang membership as a simple dichotomy (i.e., member, nonmember) has many virtues from a measurement standpoint. However, this parsimony may miss important substantive variation in *levels* of membership, especially with younger adolescents, whose membership may be more transitory and reflect patterns of age-graded friendships. For middle school adolescents (ages 12–14), their involvement in gangs may reflect their diverse constellation of friends, some of whom may be gang members and some of whom may not (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998). Thus, it is possible to be *involved* in gang activities as a consequence of one's friendships with gang members but not claim membership.

Although previous studies uncovered a relationship between self-reported gang membership and delinquency, research has yet to examine whether the same relationship holds for those who are involved with gang members without claiming membership themselves. We hypothesize that, given gang members' higher levels of involvement in crime, associating with gang members has a stronger effect on self-reported involvement in crime than associating with delinquent nongang peers would have. The longitudinal work of Battin et al. (1998) and Thornberry et al. (1998) provide the basis for our speculation in this regard. This is one of the key issues this article examines. As dependent variables, we used both self-reported and official measures of delinquency. It is a well-established principle in measurement theory that the strongest indication of external validity occurs when two measures of the same trait from different measurement systems are related (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Measuring the level of delinquency by both self-reports and official records provides such a test and follows Battin et al.'s (1998) practice. In this article, we use referral to juvenile court as the measure of official involvement in delinquency.

### GANG PROBLEMS IN ST. LOUIS

The most recent gang problem in St. Louis emerged in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. As with many U.S. cities, St. Louis had been the scene of reported gang problems during other periods dating back more than a century. In the 19th century, gangs of German and Irish youths fought in neighborhoods just north of what was then downtown. In his study of gangs in early 20th-century Chicago, Thrasher (1927) referred to gangs existing at that time in St. Louis. In the years following World War II, the city experienced the first appearance of African American gangs, with gangs battling

for the same neighborhoods as their Euro-American predecessors and distinguishing their rivalries with the same colors of blue and red. Still, when W. Miller (1975) studied St. Louis in the 1970s, he concluded that the city did not have a gang crime problem. By the late 1980s, St. Louis was identified by a national study (Spergel & Curry, 1993) as having an "emerging" gang problem. By 1991, St. Louis made its first contribution to a national tabulation of gang statistics. In that year, the St. Louis Police Department reported 33 gangs and 8 gang homicides. During the mid-1990s, gang-related homicides had grown to be a significant portion of all homicides in St. Louis (Rosenfeld, Bray, & Egley, 1999). By this time, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) had undertaken their field study of 99 active gang members that would reveal gangs in St. Louis to be disorganized yet extremely violent.

### THE STRUCTURE OF GANGS AND PATTERNS OF GANG INVOLVEMENT

Theoretical patterns of gang involvement are closely related to theories about gang structure. Hypothetical models of gang structure range from highly structured, hierarchical organizations to loosely structured manifestations of collective behavior. At one end of this continuum are the observations of Sánchez-Jankowski (1991), who portrayed gangs as hierarchical organizations with clearly established leaders and rational goals and actions. Taylor (1990) described some of the gangs he found in Detroit similarly and labeled them "corporate" gangs. Padilla (1992) examined the transformation of a Chicago youth gang into a more rationally organized and efficient drug-selling enterprise.

These highly structured gangs are in contrast to the gangs observed by other researchers. For Thrasher (1927, p. 202), the gang was, above all, a primary group based on informality and face-to-face association. The conflict gangs observed by Spergel (1964) were neither "permanent" nor "stable." The gangs that Short and Strodtbeck (1965, p. 196) studied were "very fluid," and in the view of the members interviewed by Suttles (1968, p. 176), the gang was a "happy coincidence" and "spontaneous cohesion." More recently, Hagedorn (1998) depicted Milwaukee gangs as dynamic, age-graded subgroups in which the informal patterns of association varied over time. Participation in and the level of organization of St. Louis gangs were portrayed by Decker (1996) as increasing and decreasing in conjunction with patterns of violence. Decker referred to gangs as forms of collective behavior, rather than complex organizations. In a study of organizational structure in four gangs identified by the police as potential organized crime groups in Chicago and

San Diego, Decker, Bynum and Weisel (1998) found that only one of the gangs displayed any kind of sustained organizational structure, and that gang fell short of what could be called "organized crime."

Different theoretical processes of how youths become gang members are associated with the highly organized and the loosely organized perspectives of gang organization. Rationally organized gangs with well-defined structures suggest rational processes for admitting or recruiting members. As Sánchez Jankowski (1991) reported, becoming a member of a well-organized gang required two explicit decisions. The individual decided to become a member, and the gang decided to permit membership. Gang members joined gangs primarily for material gain but also for recreation and commitment to community. On the other side of the process, gangs recruited members as needed to strengthen existing resources or to gain organizational control of new resources. In this model, the line between a member and a nonmember was distinct.

Under the theoretical model of loosely organized gangs, the nature of membership is quite different. From Spergel's (1964), research in New York, "Identification as a member of a gang . . . was not a stable, permanent, once-and-for-all social fact (p. 66). . . . One youngster might, for a relatively short period of time, 'hang around' a group and be recognized almost immediately as a member of that group. Another individual would be present a great deal of the time with the group and be regarded clearly as a non-member or as a member of another group" (pp. 66-67). Vigil (1988), for Los Angeles barrio gangs, and Decker and Van Winkle (1996, p. 67), for emerging St. Louis gangs, portrayed the process of joining a gang as gradual, sometimes taking years. According to Decker and Van Winkle (p. 68), "On average, members of our sample heard about their gang while they were twelve, started hanging out with gang members at thirteen, and joined before their fourteenth birthday. This suggests a gradual process of affiliation rather than one of active recruitment." From her ethnographic study of female gang members in Columbus, Ohio, and St. Louis, J. Miller (2001) reached a similar conclusion of gradual gang involvement for girls.

The model of loosely organized gangs with gradual processes of affiliation is conducive to the identification of different levels of gang membership. Thrasher (1927) spoke of the inner circle, the rank and file, and fringe members. Vigil (1988) classified members as regular, peripheral, and temporary. Hagedorn (1998, p. 90) noted a division between "main groups" and "wannabe's" in Milwaukee gangs, but added, "A 'wannabe' this week may be in the 'main group' next week."

How youths come to be involved in gangs has important implications for variation in gang behavior. When gangs are highly organized and membership is well defined, it would be expected that one would find members and nonmembers. When gangs are loosely structured manifestations of collective behavior, one should find, in addition to members and nonmembers, a population of youths who are neither completely members nor nonmembers, but something in between. In this study of St. Louis, where gangs have been observed to be loosely organized, it should be possible to identify youths with differential levels of gang involvement somewhere short of gang membership. In an earlier analysis, Decker and Curry (2000) found that distinguishing between levels of gang involvement was important in understanding youths' gang-related perceptions and experiences. In this article, we explore the relationship between different levels of gang involvement and delinquency.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The design is one that has been frequently used in studies of delinquency (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Fagan, 1990). A population of students attending middle school classes was surveyed within a classroom setting and asked about their involvement in a variety of behaviors. In cooperation with the St. Louis Public Schools, three middle schools were selected on the basis of their proximity or distance from concentrations of gang homicides. Two of these three schools were in poor neighborhoods with considerable gang activity. The third was in a predominantly middle-class neighborhood with little or no gang activity, and the majority of students in this school did not reside in the surrounding community. Two additional schools that were included in the study were the St. Louis Public Schools "Tri-A" Academies. These two academies are reserved for students with disciplinary or legal problems. By combining these three types of schools (from poor neighborhoods with gang problems, from a middle-class neighborhood with few gang problems, and from the Tri-A Academies), we believe that the respondents reflect the general character of students in this urban district.

The survey was administered in the spring semester of the 1995-96 school year. The response rate among students attending school was high, as is inevitably the case, when students and teachers are offered an alternative to regular class activities. Participating schools were paid \$20 per completed survey for the purchase of educational supplies. Passive parental consent was used. Only 17 parents requested that their children not participate in the survey. In one classroom, all students collectively refused to participate; the

research assistants reported that students (who may have been gang members) announced that decision for their classmates. The greatest detriment to participation was school attendance. Although we had access to school records and were able to code each instrument with students' identification numbers, school officials could not tell us whether students were absent or had changed schools. In other school studies in which absentees could be clearly identified (Curry & Spergel, 1992), absentees were more likely to have school disciplinary and delinquency records than were attending students.

### *Measurement*

Gang membership was measured by the student's answers to the questions, "Do you belong to a gang?" and "Have you been a member of a gang in the past?" We treated affirmative answers to either question as evidence of ever having been a member of a gang, following the practice of Esbensen and Winfree (1998) for identifying gang membership in samples in which most respondents are younger than age 15. In this study, no additional criteria were imposed on the self-reporting of gang membership. This follows the recommendation of Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor (2001, p. 124), who found self-nomination to be a "particularly robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from non-gang youth." In their study, along a continuum of an increasingly restrictive definition of gang membership, the greatest difference in gang behaviors and attitudes was observed between youths who had never been gang members and youths who self-reported only current or prior gang involvement. In another study, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) required that respondents also answer one of two items about their group's illegal activity. Since our main concern was to examine the relationship between the level of gang membership and delinquency, we did not impose any requirement for illegal activity on our operational definition of gang membership. This measurement strategy avoided the potential tautology of establishing the relationship between membership and delinquency in our operational definition (Ball & Curry, 1995; Short, 1998).

Gang involvement was measured by four of eight criteria used by Curry and Spergel (1992) to measure gang involvement other than self-reported membership in a gang. Curry and Spergel found that self-reported measures of gang-related behavior, independent of membership, were significantly related to levels of delinquency. The specific four measures we used are shown in Table 1. Self-reported delinquency was measured by answers to a number of items asking if youths had committed a particular delinquent act. Most of

these items were taken from other instruments used to study self-reported delinquency. Officially recorded delinquency was measured by linking students' files to referrals to the St. Louis City Family Court for either a status offense or a delinquency offense.<sup>1</sup> All court referrals for delinquency were captured for each student who completed a survey.

**Table 1. Gang Involvement Behavior Items for Nongang Members ( $n = 453$ )**

	<i>n</i>	%
Have gang members as friends	168	37.1%
Worn gang colors	137	30.2%
Hang out with gang members	107	23.6%
Flashed gang signs	90	19.9%

Note: Unanswered items treated as not reported.

## FINDINGS

### *Prevalence of Gang Membership*

All the students at two of the middle schools and one of the academies were African American. At the third middle school, the majority of students in the sample (62.1%) were white. Of the 533 respondents to the survey, 80 (15.0%) reported being either currently or formerly a gang member. The prevalence of gang membership is somewhat higher than the 10.6% reported in the multisite, 11-city survey of youths conducted by Esbensen and colleagues (see Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). This difference is most likely the result of the use of a more restrictive definition in the latter study. Elsewhere, using a similar classification procedure as the present survey, Esbensen et al. (2001) reported that 16.8% of the sample responded as ever having been a gang member.

There were differences associated with gender and race. With regard to gender, 18.1% of the boys and 11.5% of the girls reported ever being a gang member (a statistically significant difference at the .05 level). These observed prevalence levels of gang membership are slightly higher than the 13.6% for boys and 7.8% for girls reported by Esbensen and Winfree (1998) and are, in part, likely to be the result of the difference in classification procedures and the extent of gang problems in the study sites. With regard to race, overall, only five white students (8.2%) identified themselves as ever having been gang members. The expected values for white students

<sup>1</sup> These data were provided through the cooperation of the St. Louis Family Court.

were too small to compute a chi-square comparing the prevalence of gang membership for whites and African Americans. The overall percentage of African American respondents who reported ever having been gang members was 15.9%, but at the predominantly white school, 28.6% of the African Americans did so (a statistically significant difference at the .05 level).<sup>2</sup>

### *Prevalence of Gang Involvement*

Treating any one of the gang-related behaviors in Table 1 as being gang involved, it is possible to examine the proportion of youths who reported never being a gang member who reported some level of gang involvement (see Table 2). Of the 453 respondents who reported never having been a gang member, 260 (57.4%) reported at least one kind of gang involvement. With regard to gender, 59.1% of the boys and 55.6% of the girls who were never gang members reported some level of gang involvement. This difference is not statistically significant and suggests that knowledge of and involvement in gang behavior is quite high, even for nonmembers. With regard to race, 60.1% of the African American youths and 37.5% of the white youths who were not gang members reported some level of gang involvement (a statistically significant difference at the .01 level). The one Latino in the survey reported that he had friends who were gang members. The finding that the majority of nonmembers reported some level of gang involvement underscores the pervasive effect of gangs among middle school students in these neighborhoods. It suggests that the influence of gangs on nongang members may be greater than previous studies have estimated.

### *Gang Involvement and Self-reported Delinquency*

Separating respondents into gang members, nongang members, and nonmembers who have some level of gang involvement gave us an opportunity to expand what we know about the status of being involved with yet not a member of a gang. Given the empirically established relationship between gang membership and delinquency, any status that is defined by the social space between gang member and nonmember should be differentially associated with delinquency. In Table 3, nonmembers with gang involvement are labeled "gang involved."

The respondents were asked about their participation in a range of delinquent behaviors, including serious, minor, and drug

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<sup>2</sup> The source of this difference remains unknown to us, but it may be that some African American students perceive themselves differently at an integrated school or feel the need to affiliate with a gang (for protection) in such a setting.

**Table 2. Students' Characteristics and Gang Involvement**

Characteristics	Total		Gang Member		Gang Involved	
	Reported	%	Reported	% <sup>a</sup>	Reported	% <sup>a</sup>
African American	471	88.4	75	15.9 <sup>b</sup>	238	50.5*
White	61	11.4	5	8.2	21	34.4
Hispanic <sup>c</sup>	1	.2	0	.0	1	100.0
Male <sup>b</sup>	281	52.7	51	18.1*	136	48.4 <sup>b</sup>
Female	252	47.3	29	11.5	124	49.2

<sup>a</sup> Level of statistical significance of chi-square test.

<sup>b</sup> Not statistically significant at .05.

<sup>c</sup> Category not included in statistical computations.

\*  $p < .05$ .

offenses. Table 3 shows the relationships between level of gang involvement and self-reported delinquency. For each of the 12 self-reported delinquent offenses, the differences (as measured by gamma) across the three levels of gang involvement are statistically significant at the .001 level. For all 12 self-reported delinquency items, the prevalence rate for gang-involved youths is both greater than that of youths who were not gang involved and lower than that of those who self-reported gang membership.<sup>3</sup>

For all but one of the measures, the paired comparisons between nonmembers with no gang involvement and nonmembers with gang involvement is statistically significant at the .05 level (at least). The exception is stealing something worth more than \$50, for which 3.6% of nonmembers not gang involved and 8.1% of the gang-involved nonmembers stand significantly apart from the 30% reported by gang members. A smaller number of the self-reported delinquency items differentiate between gang-involved nonmembers and gang members. Most notable, the prevalence rate for using violence against another person among gang-involved youths (55.8%) is more than double that of youths who reported no gang

<sup>3</sup> From a longitudinal study of Seattle youths, Battin et al. (1998) concluded that the effect of gang membership on self-reported delinquency remained statistically significant even when having delinquent friends was controlled. To examine the possibility that our measure of gang involvement may simply be a proxy for delinquent friends, we controlled for four variables related to information about friends' delinquency. These variables were positively related to self-reported and officially recorded delinquency as well as gang-involvement status. In a series of logistic regression analyses (17), we regressed each of the last eight self-reported delinquency measures, the three victimization measures, and the two postsurvey measures of family court referrals on gang involvement (as a three-value categorical variable) and the report of delinquent friends. For only one of the self-reported delinquency measures, stealing something worth less than \$50, was the coefficient for delinquent friends statistically significant when gang involvement was not. In the others, either gang involvement alone was a statistically significant predictor of the outcome variable or both gang involvement and having delinquent friends were statistically significant predictors. Therefore, gang involvement had an independent effect on delinquency beyond that attributed to delinquent friends. The table of results is available from the authors.

**Table 3. Gang Status and Self-Reported Delinquency and Victimization**

Delinquency or Victimization	Noninvolved (n = 193)		Gang Involved (n = 260)		Gang Member (n = 80)	
	Reported	% <sup>a</sup>	Reported	% <sup>a</sup>	Reported	%
Thrown objects at cars or people***	29	15.0***	93	35.8**	44	55.0
Damaged or destroyed property***	18	9.3***	68	26.2 <sup>b</sup>	29	36.3
Ran away from home***	11	5.7**	36	13.8 <sup>b</sup>	15	18.8
Stole something less than \$50***	19	9.8*	48	18.5 <sup>b</sup>	21	26.3
Stole something more than \$50***	7	3.6 <sup>b</sup>	21	8.1***	24	30.0
Bought, held, or sold stolen goods***	10	5.2***	39	15.0***	27	33.8
Used violence against someone***	49	25.4***	145	55.8 <sup>b</sup>	52	65.0
Own or possess a gun***	4	2.1***	27	10.4***	30	37.5
Carried a gun***	6	3.1**	21	8.1***	25	31.3
Used beer or wine***	30	15.5*	61	23.5***	42	52.5
Used hard liquor***	8	4.1*	26	10.0***	32	40.0
Used marijuana***	13	6.7***	45	17.3***	42	52.5
Threatened with a gun***	15	7.8 <sup>b</sup>	35	13.5***	26	32.5
Shot at with a gun***	8	4.1***	39	15.0*	22	27.5
Injured by gunshot***	3	1.6 <sup>b</sup>	11	4.2**	10	12.5

Note: Gamma across all three groups is statistically significant at the .001 level for all items except for status-offense referral.

<sup>a</sup> Level of statistical significance of chi-square test results between adjacent two groups.

<sup>b</sup> Not statistically significant at .05.

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

involvement (25.4%) and approaches that of self-reported gang members (65.0%).

### *Gang Involvement and Victimization*

The relationship between offending and victimization has been well established in research on delinquency (Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991) and has received support in the gang literature (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Moore, 1991). Decker (1996) reported that more than a dozen of his 99 respondents had been killed within five years of the conclusion of his study. These results show that gang members have violent victimization rates that exceed those of nonmembers. Victimization was measured by self-reports of being threatened with a gun, shot at, or injured by gunshot. Table 3 illustrates that gang membership is as strongly associated with victimization as offending. But at least in one case, having been shot at, gang-involved nonmembers are more than three times as likely to report affirmatively than nonmembers with no gang involvement. Those who reported ever having been a gang member were more

than four times more likely than nongang members with no gang involvement to have been victimized in each of the listed events. For example, 12.5% of the gang members reported having been injured by gunshot, over four times that of non-gang-involved nonmembers (1.6%) and almost three times the rate reported by gang-involved nonmembers (4.2%).

Taken together, these findings are congruous with the contagion of violence purported to be associated with gang activity (Decker, 1996). Initial acts of gang-related violence arouse and expand the willingness of others to engage in retaliatory violence. Within this spatial concentration, gang members may often assume the role of victim, perpetrator, or witness to violence. From the method of measurement used in this survey, it is impossible to conclude with certainty that gang members in this sample were necessarily involved in gang-related violence. However, it is noteworthy that the association among gang membership, delinquency, and victimization was observed and categorically supported among a sample of young adolescent gang members.

#### *Gang Involvement and Officially Recorded Delinquency*

While recent research has continued to support the link between gang membership and self-reported offending, the link between gang membership and officially recorded delinquency is not as frequently documented. From a survey of young adolescents in Chicago, Curry (2000) found that among those who self-reported both gang involvement and delinquency, over half were arrested for at least one delinquent act in the subsequent five years, and over half of those who were so arrested were apprehended for involvement in a gang-motivated offense. Thus, these findings suggest that there is a considerable overlap between youth-based surveys and official records regarding adolescents' gang membership and delinquency.

From an analysis of the data of referrals to the St. Louis Family Court, it was possible to examine the relationship between self-reported gang membership and referrals to the court. All court referrals between September 1993 and December 31, 2000, were checked for matches with the respondents to the survey on child's name, date of birth, and address listed in the school records. Respondents with either status-offense referrals or delinquency referrals between 1993 and 2000 were identified. Although the survey data were essentially cross-sectional, it was possible to add some degree of chronological structure to the analysis by classifying each referral as being before or after the administration of the survey.

Table 4 compares the court referral records for respondents who identified themselves as gang members, nonmembers with some gang involvement, and nonmembers with no gang involvement. As should be expected, rates of referral prior to the survey (when the respondents were younger) were appreciably lower than in the five years following the survey. The status-offense referral rates for each of the three gang-involvement groups before the survey was administered were not significantly different. In fact, the nonmembers who reported gang involvement in the survey had a slightly lower rate of referrals for status offenses prior to the survey. The referral rates for delinquency before the survey varied in the ordinal direction found for self-reported delinquency, increasing from nonmembers with no gang involvement to nonmembers with gang involvement to self-reported members. The difference across the three categories was statistically significant at the .05 level, but the differences between consecutive pairs of categories were not statistically significant.

**Table 4. Gang Status and Officially Recorded Delinquency**

Officially Recorded Delinquency	Noninvolved ( <i>n</i> = 193)		Gang Involved ( <i>n</i> = 260)		Gang Member ( <i>n</i> = 80)	
	Reported	% <sup>a</sup>	Reported	% <sup>a</sup>	Reported	%
Referred for status offense prior to survey	9	4.7 <sup>b</sup>	10	3.8 <sup>b</sup>	5	6.3
Referred for status offense post survey***	30	15.5***	74	28.5 <sup>b</sup>	29	36.3
Referred for delinquency prior to survey*	11	5.7 <sup>b</sup>	23	8.8 <sup>b</sup>	12	15.0
Referred for delinquency post survey***	48	24.9**	96	36.9 <sup>b</sup>	39	48.8
Mean times referred for delinquency post survey***	0.58*		1.12***		2.03	

Note: Gamma across all three groups is statistically significant at the .001 level for all items except for status-offense referral.

<sup>a</sup> Level of statistical significance of chi-square test results between adjacent two groups

<sup>b</sup> Not statistically significant at .05.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4 reveals that the same rank-order relationship holds between the three levels of gang involvement and officially recorded delinquency. Nonmembers with gang involvement were more likely to have been referred for status offenses than were nonmembers with no gang involvement. Nonmembers with gang involvement were more likely to have been referred for delinquency after the survey than were nonmembers with no gang involvement. Just over one-third of the gang-involved youths (36.9%) were referred to the

juvenile court for a delinquent offense, well below the prevalence rate for gang members (48.8%), yet appreciably greater than that of youths who were not gang involved (24.9%). The differences between groups within each type of referral after the survey are statistically significant. On the whole, these results provide strong evidence of an intermediary status between gang membership and nonmembership, whereby even a minimal amount of involvement in gang-related behaviors clearly separates these youths from their uninvolved peers in terms of self-reported and officially recorded delinquency.

The proportions referred in the five years following the survey were significantly different at the .001 level. The proportion of nongang youths referred was four times that referred prior to the survey, as was the proportion of gang-involved nonmember youths. While the increase in the proportion of gang members who were referred after the survey was only three times the proportion of members referred prior to the survey, the amplification of the greater initial proportion resulted in a much larger gap between the nongang and gang-involved youths. This difference in officially recorded delinquent offending underscores the importance of self-reported gang membership as a predictor of delinquency (Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998).

These results unequivocally demonstrate that increased involvement in gang-related behaviors for adolescents significantly enhances the risk of delinquency and victimization. This finding highlights both the significance of gang involvement for offending and the role of engaging in gang behavior, short of full-fledged membership, in enhancing offending. The increased levels of offending associated with engaging in gang behaviors are quite dramatic, underscoring the need to address both gang-involved and marginally gang-involved youths.

## CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the relationship between self-reported gang membership and delinquency found in other cities holds for St. Louis.<sup>4</sup> Since the survey was conducted in middle schools, it is safe to conclude that the relationship between gang membership and delinquency emerges in early adolescence. Whereas most previous surveys have shown the relationship between self-reported gang involvement and self-reported delinquency, this study also found a statistically significant relationship

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that this was not a random sample, so it is not feasible to generalize to other populations.

between self-reported gang membership and referral to the juvenile court for delinquency.

In addition to identifying a distinction between gang members and nonmembers with respect to delinquency, the survey identified an interstitial status between full-fledged gang membership and nonmembership. Nonmember gang involvement was measured using a set of criteria developed by Curry and Spergel (1992) in studying Chicago youths. The St. Louis Police Department Gang Unit uses the designation "gang associate" to identify suspects who are known to have some association with gangs but are not known to be members. We think that this designation may be useful in research. It is comparable to labels used in other research, such as "peripheral members," "marginal members," and "wanna be's." The significance of this gang-associate status is demonstrated by its strong relationship to delinquency. For a range of measures of self-reported and officially recorded delinquency, the prevalence of offending for this group was shown to be between that of gang members and nonmembers who were not involved in gang behavior. The delinquent involvement of this group of associate members lies along a scale between full-fledged members and nonmembers.

A longitudinal survey design is required to discover if identified gang associates are in a transitional phase that would, in some cases, lead to full gang membership or if their association with gangs would fade. Still, one may draw conclusions about the social structure and dynamics of gang involvement. While the study found that self-perceived gang membership is an important predictor of delinquency, it demonstrated that marginal gang involvement is associated with a level of risk of delinquency and violence that is greater than that experienced by nonmembers.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY**

This study joins others (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998) in showing that the relationship between gang membership and delinquency emerges in early adolescence. The findings also indicate that engaging in gang behaviors is strongly and consistently associated with involvement in a variety of forms of delinquency and victimization. Thus, associating with gang members ("hanging out") and engaging in gang behaviors (adopting gang mannerisms) both have important consequences for delinquency, even for nongang members. It is not necessary for an individual to self-report gang membership to experience the delinquency-enhancing effects of gang membership. This finding supports the need for early prevention and intervention programs with youths and families, especially in neighborhoods with high levels of gang membership or in families with older

siblings who belong to gangs. This finding also underscores the need for gang intervention programs that deal with actively involved gang members, as well as individuals who are peripheral to the gang. Minimizing the influences of gang members on peripheral members or nonmembers should pay dividends for both delinquency prevention and intervention efforts. We also believe that this finding should be particularly relevant for programming directed at young girls who may not (yet) be active gang members, but who may associate with such individuals either through familial or associational ties.

The image of the gang that is supported by these findings is one of a loosely structured organization. As was noted in prior studies in St. Louis (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996), gang activity can be best viewed as a form of collective behavior, with many youths perceiving themselves, at least at some point in time, as gang members. However, other youths who do not consider themselves ever to have been gang members continue to associate with gangs and gang members and are differentially involved in the overall patterns of gang-related crime and delinquency. This finding may also be true for individuals who once were gang members and have cut their formal ties with the gang, but still maintain friendships with gang members and occasionally engage in gang behavior with them.

Suppression approaches that treat gangs as organized crime groups have been shown to be inappropriate responses to most gangs (Decker et al., 1998). The more loosely structured nature of gang organization calls for more comprehensive responses that require a range of coordinated prevention, intervention, and suppression activities. This finding seems particularly appropriate for adolescents of the age range in our study. The emphasis in gang programming over the past decade has been on suppression (Decker & Curry, 2000; Spergel & Curry, 1993). Such approaches have gang members as their focus and hence may miss a significant number of gang-involved youths who may not be identified as gang members or may not identify themselves as such, particularly those who are younger adolescents. Suppression efforts appear to be operating at maximum capacity, that is, there appears to be little excess capacity in law enforcement efforts to address gangs. The findings about suppression highlight the need for programs that focus on the broad range of differentially involved gang youths and their range of different problems and needs.

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