



Deconstructing Gang Culture in African American Adolescents: Communal Insights and Interventions

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Objectives

- Definition and Etiology of Gangs
- The Role of Community in Gang Culture
- The Portrayal of Gangs
- Correlation Between Violence and Health
- Protective Factors and Interventions
- Look for **bolded** text

Defining a Gang

- Merriam-Webster (2023)
 - A group of persons working to unlawful or antisocial ends
 - *Especially:* a band of antisocial adolescents
 - A group of persons working together
- **National Institute of Justice (NIJ) (2023)**
 - **Any ongoing organization, association or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts.**
- What are some examples of “gangs” in our society?

Etiology of Gangs

- “Street gangs are not just a criminal justice issue, but a social problem, which is triggered by poverty, peer pressure, boredom, despair and lacking a sense of belonging.”
 - Barrett (2010)
 - FBI.gov (2023) According to the latest data available, the FBI quoted 33,000 gangs and 1.4 million gang members active in the US.
- Gang members in the US were 50% Hispanic or Latino, 32% African American, 10% white, and 8% other
 - Youth.gov (2023)
- A sense of hopelessness and desperation can result from being unable to provide the basic necessities. “Young people living in poverty may find it difficult to meet basic physical and psychological needs, which can lead to a lack of self-worth and pride”
 - Lee, Dean, & Parker (2020)
- Individuals who are faced with a lack of money many times turn to crime if they cannot earn enough at a legitimate job to support themselves or their families. “This partly explains why gangs exist in poor, rundown areas of cities.”
 - Grabianowski (2021)

Poll Question #1

- What percentage of juveniles/adolescents identify as gang members?
 - A. 2%
 - B. 8%
 - C. 19%
 - D. 27%

Prevalence of Adolescents in Gangs

- Researchers estimate that 2% of gang members are juveniles, but they admit that the statistics on how many join and leave gangs are hard to collect. Nevertheless, according to their estimates, around 401,000 young people join gangs in the US, and another 378,000 leave gangs every year.
 - Research Gate (2023)
- The National Gang Center found that 8% of all youth in the US have joined a gang at least once by their twenties. This statistic goes up when urban areas are in question because they have 15% of youth joining a gang at some point during their adolescent and young adult life.
 - National Gang Center (2023)
- According to the latest FBI data, the number of street gang members is increasing in 49% of jurisdictions.
 - FBI.gov (2023)

Gangs and Human Trafficking

- A Portland study found that 49.1% of human trafficking victims were connected to a gang one way or another. 96.4% of the victims were female.
 - As the US Attorney General stated, gangs learned that trafficking people was much cheaper and less risky than smuggling guns or drugs.
 - National Training & Technical Assistance Center, 2023
- What are the implications of these findings?
- Why might it be safer to traffic people rather than guns or drugs?

Role of Community in Gangs

- “It takes a village”
 - Where is the village nowadays?
 - Example of utilizing school bus drivers in Los Angeles, CA
- Where are the fathers?
 - Why does the research state that having a male role model in an adolescent’s life is critical?
 - Informal study done with certified youth in Dallas County
 - **A positive male role model, which can be a father, or another individual has been found to be an essential in child development (discussed more during ACE’s)**
- Government assistance
 - “Urban gun violence is driven by unaddressed structural racism, including but not limited to government disinvestment in racially segregated neighborhoods.”
 - Corburn, Nidam, & Fukutome-Lopez (2022)

African Americans in Gangs

- “Gang Membership among Adolescents from Distinct Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds: The Roles of Neighborhood Conditions and Victimization” (Mendez & Kerig, 2023)
- Given that minoritized youth are disproportionately represented in gangs and differentially exposed to many of the risk factors for gang membership, it is important to examine whether gang membership pathways are similar or distinct across racial and ethnic groups.
- The present study examined longitudinal self-report data, including neighborhood conditions, direct and witnessed victimization, and gang membership vs. non-membership gathered from 1,284 adolescents identified as serious offenders (22% non-Hispanic White, 36% Latinx, and 43% African American).
- Findings from structural equation modeling showed that pathways towards gang membership were similar across racial and ethnic groups. Results further demonstrated that neighborhood conditions increased the likelihood of adolescent gang participation through direct and witnessed victimization.

African Americans in Gangs Cont.

- Although a considerable number of non-Hispanic White youth also endorse gang membership (Esbensen & Carson, 2012; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998), there continues to be a disproportionate representation rate of African American and Latinx adolescents among gang participants (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Mendez et al., 2020; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Wojciechowski, 2021).
- For instance, in a large sample of middle and high school students, Merrin et al. (2015) found that, relative to non-Hispanic White youth, African American adolescents evinced 6.49 greater odds of joining a gang.
- Evidence shows that gang participation during adolescence predicts increases in mental health difficulties, criminal behavior, and incarceration during adulthood
 - Connolly & Jackson, 2019; Gilman et al., 2014a
- Annually, a large sum of federal funding is allotted to youth gang prevention and intervention. For example, from 2017 to 2019, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) distributed approximately 16.5 million to improve gang programs across communities in the United States
 - Harp, 2020

Poll Question #2

- Are there any benefits to a gang?
- Which is the top reason as to why a juvenile may join a gang?
 - A. To have protection within their community
 - B. Gain a sense of purpose
 - C. Boredom
 - D. To obtain basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, etc.,)

Why May Youth Join a Gang?

- Protection within one's community
 - Compton Example
- Social support
- Social Status
- **Various factors, which include lack of positive role models, environmental stressors, and inability to obtain basic needs.**

Social Ecology

- Social ecology definition
 - Is the study of how individuals interact with and respond to the environment around them, and how these interactions affect society and the environment as a whole.
- Neighborhoods with adverse conditions resulting from systemic segregation, oppression, structural inequalities, and disinvestment of resources, may be characterized by adults fighting loudly, open use of drugs in the streets, inadequate supervision of youth, abandoned buildings or tagged by graffiti, streets littered with trash, and overt commission of crimes, are posited to foment social disorganization in communities
 - (Cahill et al., 2019; Kephart, 2022; Shaw & McKay, 1942, 1969; see Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Kubrin & Wo, 2016 for reviews)
- In a seminal study of risk factors for gang participation, Hill and colleagues (1999) found that school-age children who lived in neighborhoods with high adversity were three times more likely than their peers to become gang members during adolescence.

Social Ecology

- A recent longitudinal study also demonstrated that neighborhood adversity predicts a 30% increase in the vulnerability of first-time gang entry
 - (Merrin et al., 2020)
- Adolescents who experience direct and/or witnessed violence occurring in their homes or communities may perceive gang life as a mean of escape from this victimization
 - (Melde et al., 2009; Melde et al., 2012; Swaner, 2022; for a review see Kerig & Mendez, 2022)
- Several cross-sectional studies demonstrate that adolescents who identify as gang members report heightened levels of childhood victimization, including sexual and physical abuse and exposure to domestic and community violence
 - (e.g., Cepeda et al., 2016; Kerig et al., 2016; Petering, 2016; see Kerig & Mendez, 2022, and Raby & Jones, 2016 for reviews).

Portrayal of Gangs

- In the media

- *Code Of The Tweet: Urban Gang Violence In The Social Media Age*
 - Stuart, 2019
- Drawing from two years of ethnographic fieldwork on Chicago's South Side, this study asks how gang-associated black youth use social media to challenge rivals.
- Specifically, gang-associated youth exploit social media to publicly invalidate the authenticity of their rivals' performances of toughness, strength, and street masculinity.

- In correctional settings

- What percentage of adolescents were gang-affiliated that were "certified youth?"
- One study (Marshall, 2017) identified that 47% of juvenile inmates belong to a gang.

- As a means of survival

- Dissertation chair and advisor spent time w/ a gang
- **Some adolescents choose to be gang-affiliated so that their families can be protected.**

Scenario

- You and your companions have just survived the crash of a small plane. Both the pilot and co-pilot were killed in the crash. Your group of survivors managed to salvage the following items:
 - A ball of steel wool
 - A small ax
 - A loaded .45-caliber pistol
 - Cigarette lighter (without fluid)
 - Extra shirt and pants for each survivor
 - 20 x 20 ft. piece of heavy-duty canvas
 - A sectional air map made of plastic
 - One quart of 100-proof whiskey
 - A compass
 - Family-size chocolate bars (one per person)
- Your task as a group is to list the above 12 items in order of importance for your survival. List the uses for each. You **MUST** come to agreement as a group.
 - Crystal Springs Reserve Foundation





Correlation Between Violence and Health

- Stress and health

- The leading cause of death in African American men aged 24–34 years old is homicide.
 - (CDC, 2011).
- African American men are also more likely not to have regular care, live in food deserts, work in unsafe environments and engage in unhealthy behaviors like tobacco use and alcohol consumption.
 - (Metzl, 2013).
- What are some reasons why individuals choose to utilize tobacco, in particular?

- Environment and health

- Although Hispanics deal with gang violence, they generally live in safer communities compared to African Americans
 - (Davies & Fagan, 2012).

- Access to resources and health

- There is a lack of health services that support African American men that witness or experience violence
 - (O'Connor, Weinstein, & Stylianou, 2017).
- Residing in a subordinate underprivileged community with high violent activity, reduced utilization of healthcare services and a lack of supportive services leaves African American men at risk for deprived health outcomes.
 - Community violence and African American male health outcomes: An integrative review of literature. Thomas, et al. (2020)

Interventions

- Emerging from the civil rights consciousness of the Vietnam War era, the term *teach-in* denoted a variant form of protest, related to the sit-in, that took place on a college or university campus as a means of providing lectures, debates, and discussions to raise awareness on social and political issues.
 - Cupchoy & Dennis (2022)

Protective Factors to Violence

Polling Question #3

- Additional community buffers against violence and associated risks include:
 - A. Safe and stable housing.
 - B. Economic opportunities.
 - C. Increasing access to services and social support.
 - D. Residents' willingness to assist each other.
 - E. Collective views that violence is not acceptable.
- Which one from above do you believe is most important?

Protective Factors to Violence

- Positive and warm parent-youth relationships in which parents set consistent, developmentally appropriate limits and demonstrate interest in their children's education and social relationships.
- A positive, caring relationship with a reliable and ethical adult.
- Feeling connected at and to their school.
- Experiencing academic success.
- Interacting with prosocial and non-violent peers.

Protective Factors to Violence

- Physical environments like schools, parks, and business and residential areas that are regularly repaired and maintained and designed to increase visibility, control access, and promote positive interactions and appropriate use of public spaces.
- Healthy social and problem-solving skills.
- Emotional regulation skills.
- School readiness and academic achievement.

Protective Factors to Violence

- Jolliffe and his colleagues (2016) completed an article entitled “Protective factors for violence: Results from the Pittsburgh Youth Study.”
- The Pittsburgh Youth Study, is a prospective longitudinal survey of 503 boys followed-up from age 7 onwards.
- Variables measured at age 10 – 12 were investigated as predictors of an all-source measure of violence between ages 13 and 19.

Protective Factors to Violence Findings

- Risk-based protective factors for the various risk groups identified:
- Individual factors
 - Low hyperactivity
 - Low psychopathic features
- Family
 - Good supervision
 - Low parental stress

Protective Factors to Violence Findings

- School
 - High academic achievement
 - Positive attitude to school
- Demographic characteristics
 - Older mother
 - Good quality housing
- Overall, high academic achievement was consistently found to be an interactive protective factor and was consistently independently related to low levels of violence.
 - Why might this be?

Urban Green Space

- Astell-Burt et al. (2022) conducted the first person-level (i.e. non-ecological) study internationally to assess whether urban green space was associated with lower antidepressant prescribing, talking therapy referrals, and associated mental healthcare expenditure.
- “Is Urban Green Space Associated with Lower Mental Healthcare Expenditure?”
- Previous researchers reported lower odds of psychological distress and better general health in populations with more trees nearby.
- (Astell-Burt and Feng, 2019; Jiang et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2017).
- Several ecological studies reported lower levels of antidepressant prescribing (Helbich et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2015) and lower Medicare costs in areas with more tree canopy (Becker et al., 2019).

Urban Green Space Cont.

- While the evidence of mental health benefits from investing in green space accumulates, claims of reduced healthcare expenditure are rarely supported by evidence from analyses of actual healthcare data. Additionally, the question of 'who pays?' has been ignored. We addressed these gaps using person-level data in three Australian cities.
- Methods:
- 55,339 participants with a mean follow-up time of 4.97 years in the Sax Institute's 45 and Up Study (wave 2, collected 2012–2015) were linked to fee-for-service records of antidepressant prescriptions and talking therapy subsidized by the Australian Government (including data on per unit fee, state subsidy, and individual co-payment).
- Total green space, tree canopy, and open grass within 1.6 km road network distances were linked to each participant.
- Multilevel logistic, negative binomial, and generalized linear models with gamma distribution adjusted for demographic and socioeconomic confounders were used to assess the association between each green space variable and prescribing/referral and costs of antidepressants and talking therapy.

Urban Green Space Cont.

- Conclusion:
 - Although green space supports mental health, these unexpected results provide pause for reflection on whether greening strategies will always result in purported reductions in mental healthcare expenditure.
- Patterning of green space with respect to income and education were reported in Supplementary Table 6, with participants with higher incomes and/or with higher educational qualifications tending to have more tree canopy cover and less open grass nearby.
- How does this statement impact the findings?
- Developed vs. undeveloped/underdeveloped

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire

- From 1995 – 1997, the CDC Kaiser ACE study involved more than 17,000 people sharing their stories about their unforgettable childhood trauma experiences.
- Let's take a look at them, and deconstruct them, to determine if they are relevant 24-years later.

ACE Questionnaire

- Did a parent or other adult in the household often: Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
- Did a parent or other adult in the household often: Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? Or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
- Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever: Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? Or attempt, or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
- Did you often feel that: No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

ACE Questionnaire

- Did you often feel that: You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? Or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
- Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
- Were any of your parents or other adult caregivers: Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at them? Or sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?

ACE Questionnaire

- Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
- Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?
- Did a household member go to prison?

What About the Positives?!

- Validating the Importance of Positive Childhood Experiences on Adult Mental Health (Gong, Yieh, & Hay, 2020)
- Are positive childhood experiences (PCEs) associated with adult depression and/or poor mental health (D/PMH), and is adult-reported social and emotional support (ARSES) independent from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)?
- In this cross-sectional study, adults reporting higher PCEs had lower odds of D/PMH and greater ARSES after accounting for ACEs. The associations of PCEs with D/PMH also remained stable when controlling for ARSES.

Implications of Findings

- Implications of this research conclude that:
 - Associations between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and risks for adult depression, poor mental health, and insufficient social and emotional support have been documented. Less is known about how positive childhood experiences (PCEs) co-occur with and may modulate the effect of ACEs on adult mental and relational health.
- An importance regarding this finding is that PCE's and ACE's can be co-occurring, and do not need to be looked at independently.

Positive Childhood Experience (PCE)

- Ability to talk with family about feelings.
 - You can talk, but are they listening?
- Felt experience that family is supportive in difficult times.
 - That may be hard if each family member is “stuck” in their own experience.
- Enjoyment and participation in community traditions.
 - Is there time for this nowadays?
- Feeling of belonging in high school.
 - I thought school was to learn?

PCE

- Feeling of being supported by friends.
 - What is a friend?
- Having at least two non-parent adults who genuinely care.
 - Why is this significant?
- Feeling safe and protected by an adult at home.
 - Just one?

Benevolent Childhood Experience (BCE)

- Developed in 2015 by Narayan and his colleagues
- Benevolence defined
 - The quality of being well meaning; kindness.

BCE

- Did you have good neighbors?
 - What does a “good neighbor do?”
- Was there an adult (not a parent/caregiver or the person from #1) who could provide you with support or advice?
- Did you have opportunities to have a good time?
 - How is this defined?
- Did you like yourself or feel comfortable with yourself?
- Did you have a predictable home routine, like regular meals and a regular bedtime?
 - Why is this important?

BCE

- Did you have at least one caregiver with whom you felt safe?
 - Did you have at least one good friend?
 - Subjective
- Did you have beliefs that gave you comfort?
- Did you like school?
 - Not, “do you go to school”
- Did you have at least one teacher who cared about you?
 - Why is this important?

Countering ACE's

Poll Question #4

- Christopher Bergland wrote an article posted in Psychology Today on 9/17/2019 entitled "A 17-Item Checklist Geared to Neutralize Early Life Distress"
- Although there's some overlap between the 10 BCEs and 7 PCEs, taken together, these 17 counter-ACEs make a comprehensive checklist that "covers all the bases" and may have the potential to neutralize some of the harmful ripple effects of early-life adversity and ACEs for future generations.
- Do you believe that if an individual has a substantial number of BCEs and PCEs can accurately neutralize some of the harmful ripple effects of early-life adversity and ACEs for future generations?
A. Yes B. No

C-ACE

- Culturally-Informed Adverse Childhood Experiences

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PMID: [33986909](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33986909/)

Making the “C-ACE” for a Culturally-Informed Adverse Childhood Experiences Framework to Understand the Pervasive Mental Health Impact of Racism on Black Youth

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C-ACE

- The high prevalence and psychological impact of childhood exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTE) is a major public health concern in the United States.
- Considerable evidence has demonstrated the significant racial disparities that exist with respect to PTE exposure, indicating that Black youth are particularly burdened by these harmful experiences.
- Racism may serve a unique role in explaining why Black youth are disproportionately exposed to PTEs, and why mental health disparities are more likely to occur following such experiences.
- Despite clear evidence acknowledging racism as a major life stressor for Black youth, theoretical models of early childhood adversity have largely neglected the multifaceted influence of racism on mental health outcomes.

The background features a light blue-to-green gradient. On the left side, there are several overlapping, wavy, light blue shapes that curve upwards and to the right. On the right side, there are several overlapping, wavy, light green shapes that curve upwards and to the left.

Questions?