

SELF-DEFINITIONS OF GANG MEMBERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT IN DELINQUENT ACTIVITIES

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There is significant disagreement among researchers as to the appropriate conceptual and operational definitions of gang membership. One of the key issues involves the validity of allowing respondents to identify themselves as gang members. This research examines the construct validity of gang membership by examining the relationship between various methods of operationalizing gang membership and delinquent involvement. The results demonstrate that there are important consequences to the method utilized to measure gang membership. Individuals reporting membership in organized gangs were far more likely to report that their gangs possess the characteristics typically associated with traditional street gangs. Likewise, the respondent's self-identification had a strong impact on both the group's and the individual's criminal behavior. Overwhelmingly, persons who considered themselves to be members of an organized gang were more apt to engage in all types of delinquent activities.

The definition of gang membership is something that has plagued gang researchers since they first began investigating this phenomenon. Unfortunately, the concept of gang membership has been “conceptually confused” (Destro, 1993, p. 278) and “notoriously imprecise” (Miller, 1992, p. 17). There is significant disagreement among researchers as to the appropriate operationalization of this term (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 29; Horowitz, 1990, pp. 37-38; Miller, 1992, p. 17; Winfree, Fuller, Vigil, & Mays, 1992, p. 30). This lack of a consensus not only makes it difficult for researchers to com-

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pare their findings and build on one another's theoretical explanations, but it also hampers both researchers and officials in being able to keep consistent and comparative records of both gang involvement and gang-related activities (Ball & Curry, 1995).

With the recognition that gangs now inhabit almost all of our major urban centers and are now prevalent in many of our smaller cities and communities (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1991, 1995), it is even more important for researchers to develop a systematic, thorough understanding of gangs and gang membership. This would not only aid law enforcement, legislatures, and those who tackle the problem firsthand but would also assist criminologists interested in developing effective strategies to prevent gang involvement.

Klein and Maxson (1987) and Miller (1980) point out that definitions of gangs have changed and evolved over time and are often related to political motivations. In the early years, these definitions were connected to liberal, social reform values. More recently, gang definitions have become more precise and have reflected more conservative values frequently emphasizing the criminal nature of gangs (Spergel, 1991, p. 10; Spergel, 1995, pp. 16-17). Whereas there is little question that the term *gang* carries negative connotations, many of the previously utilized definitions could have also been used to describe nondelinquent organizations and groups such as college fraternities. One of the defining features that has separated benign organizations and groups from traditional street gangs has been involvement in criminal activity. However, it is also this feature that presents the most challenge for researchers. Including criminal behavior in the definition of a gang presents a tautology for researchers wishing to investigate and explain criminal behavior by looking at the individual's gang membership (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, pp. 30-31; Hagedorn, 1988). Therefore, from a research perspective, it is desirable to develop definitions that do not necessitate the inclusion of criminal activity. These definitions could, for instance, focus on the organizational characteristics and structure of the gang.

The necessity of developing a uniform operationalization is evidenced in the recent policy initiatives aimed at curbing gang activities. Not only is the public's perception of the gang problem dependent on the definitions utilized, but the responses of policy makers also are driven by their definitions of the gang problem (Decker & Kempf-

Leonard, 1995, p. 15). Miller (1980) argues that it is critical for social scientists to define gangs to offset any manipulation of the term by those outside the social science research community. At a minimum, a uniform definition would enable researchers to compare results, and a definition that eliminated criminal activity as a prerequisite would enable researchers to employ the concept to explain and predict such activity. This would not only benefit researchers but also policy makers and eventually the general public.

TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS

Researchers have been attacking definitional issues since they first started studying the gang phenomenon. Some scholars have classified gang definitions into two primary categories: process-based definitions and delinquency-based definitions (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Curry & Decker, 1998; Hagedorn, 1988). The former emphasize the characteristics that lead to gang formation, whereas the latter focus on the delinquent behavior of gangs constraining the definition of gangs to those groups who are engaged in such activities.

One of the first researchers to develop an explicit processual definition of a gang was Frederick Thrasher in his 1927 study of gangs in Chicago. Thrasher (1927/1963) defined a gang as

an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory. (p. 46)

Since that time, a number of different researchers have tackled the definitional issue. In general, most conceptual definitions utilized by gang researchers focus on the organizational aspects of the gang, the purpose of the organization, and the symbolic characteristics of the gang. A number of common elements can be extrapolated from these existing definitions (for various usages, see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Summary of Gang Definitions by Key Characteristics

<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Number/ Size</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Leadership</i>	<i>Colors/ Dress/ Symbols</i>	<i>Territory/ Turf</i>	<i>Meetings/ Continual Frequent Association</i>	<i>Organized</i>	<i>Criminal Activity</i>	<i>Other</i>
Thrasher, 1927/ 1963, p. 46					X	C	Unreflective internal structure	Integrated through conflict	Interstitial group
B. Cohen, 1969, p. 66	Large	X	X		X		Elaborate		
Klein, 1971, p. 13		X						X	Perceived as distinct aggregation by others
Cartwright, Thompson, and Schwartz, 1975, p. 4						X	Integrated group	Activities are actual/ potential threat to social order	Interstitial
Miller, 1975, p. 9			X		X	X	X	X	
Miller, 1980, p. 121			X		X	X	X	X	
Johnstone, 1981, p. 355			X		X		Formal	Out-group hostility	Norms, taboos, in-group loyalty
Spergel, 1984, p. 201		X	X		X		X	X	Sense of tradition
Hagedorn, 1988, p. 5		X			X				Friendship group of adolescents committed to defending one another
Short, 1990a, p. 239					Usually	X	Group determined		Group-defined criteria of membership
Moore, 1991, p. 31					X		Age graded	Fighting/drugs	Chicano gangs

Huff, 1993, p. 4		Common		X	X	X		X	
Chicago Crime Commission, 1995, p. 5			X		X		X	X	
National Drug Intelligence Center, 1995, p. 2	> 3	X		X				X	
Decker and Van Winkle, 1996, p. 30	Group			X	X				Common interests and activities
Oehme, 1997, p. 67				X	X	X	X	Primarily violence and drug-related crimes	
Curry and Decker, 1998	> 2			X	X	Communication		X	
San Diego County Deputy Sheriffs' Association, 1990, p. 22		X		No	X	X		X	
California Council on Criminal Justice, 1986, pp. 8-9		X			X	X		X	
California Street Terror Enforcement and Prevention Act, 1998	≥ 3	X		X			Formal or informal	X	

One of the more frequently specified aspects of the gang involves the organizational structure of the gang. Most researchers who have operationalized the term have mentioned some aspect of the gang's internal structure, usually requiring that the gang be an organized entity (B. Cohen, 1969; Johnstone, 1981; Miller, 1975; Oehme, 1997; Spergel, 1984). For example, Short (1990b) defined a gang as "a group whose members meet together with some regularity over time, on the basis of group-defined criteria of membership and group-determined organizational structure, usually with (but not always . . .) some sense of territoriality" (p. 239). Others place an emphasis on the amount of contact or communication between gang members requiring either regular meetings or frequent associations (Huff, 1993; Miller, 1975; Oehme, 1997; Short, 1990a). The presence of a leader is also frequently utilized to indicate an organized gang (B. Cohen, 1969; Johnstone, 1981; Miller, 1975; Spergel, 1984). Very few researchers actually specify a minimum number of participants most commonly simply requiring it to be a "group" (B. Cohen, 1969; Curry & Decker, 1998; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; National Drug Intelligence Center, 1995).

Another set of common defining elements encompasses the symbolic aspects of the gang. The most evident criterion is the existence of a name (B. Cohen, 1969; Klein, 1971; Spergel, 1984). One of the more commonly utilized definitions was developed by Klein (1971) who defined a gang as

any detonable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood; (b) recognize themselves as a detonable 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. 13)

Some researchers also require that the gang utilize some external symbols of membership such as special clothing and/or colors (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Huff, 1993). Similarly, almost without exception, gangs define themselves by their allegiance and/or control of specific territories, a characteristic often viewed as an "essential component of the gang's identity" (Spergel, 1995, p. 87).

All of these characteristics reflect the internal structure of the gang and serve as indicators of the degree of organization and cohesion that exists within an identified group. They provide researchers with methods they can utilize to verify or confirm that an individual is a member of a traditional street “gang” and not just a group of friends or individuals that hang around together.

However, the most common defining elements are the group’s involvement in criminal activity (Curry & Decker, 1998; Huff, 1993; Klein, 1971; Miller, 1975; Spergel, 1984) and its affiliation with a specific territory or turf (Huff, 1993; Miller, 1975; Moore, 1991; Spergel, 1984; Thrasher, 1927/1963). This is what Hagedorn (1988) and Bursik and Grasmick (1993) referred to as delinquency-based definitions. As mentioned previously, many researchers are only interested in examining deviant subcultures and therefore assert that a gang is a group that by its very nature is involved in criminal and/or violent behavior. In fact, when Miller (1974) conducted a survey of 160 different criminal justice and youth service agencies querying them about their definitions of the term *gang*, engaging in illegal activities was found to be one of the six major elements that most of the agencies agreed upon. Remember Klein’s (1971) frequently utilized definition required that the group “have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response” (p. 13). Likewise, law enforcement agencies consistently include criminal participation in their definitions of gangs. The Chicago Crime Commission (1995) requires a “continuous course of criminal activity” (p. 5), whereas the San Diego County Deputy Sheriffs’ Association (1990) requires that the gang “directs its criminal activity toward rival gangs and the general population” (p. 22).

This approach is problematic for two reasons. First, researchers have discovered that most delinquent behavior is a group activity (Erickson & Jensen, 1977; Poole & Regoli, 1979; Zimring, 1981). Thus, focusing on the delinquent activities of the group makes it difficult to distinguish between a delinquent group and a delinquent gang. Second, it again presents a tautology to include such behavior in the definition of the gang, as researchers are interested in describing and explaining delinquent behavior by examining an individual’s gang membership. As Bursik and Grasmick (1993) point out, researchers should be “uncomfortable with the delinquent behavior criterion, for

it makes a possible outcome of gang activity one of the defining characteristics" (p. 123).

One common approach to tackling the operationalization of gang membership is to allow respondents to identify themselves as gang members without reference to an established definition (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Horowitz, 1983; Moore, 1991; Taylor, 1990; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Vigil, 1988). This approach has both advantages and drawbacks. Several researchers have argued that this lack of a uniform definition is desirable, as it allows for a "greater variety of activities and structures" to be represented and increases the chances of making generalizations about gangs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 30; Klein, 1995, p. 21; Winfree et al., 1992).

The major disadvantage of this approach is of course the possibility that several different definitions are being employed by various respondents, thus creating the possibility that some individuals may identify themselves as gang members when in fact they are not really a part of the type of gang the researcher is interested in studying. This makes it difficult to have complete faith in the findings derived from these studies and may potentially dilute some of the important associations between gang membership and delinquent involvement. This is important because almost all researchers who have studied the gang phenomenon are interested in explaining either individual membership and/or the consequences of such membership, in particular the link with criminal activity.

DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR

Despite definitional differences, the relationship between gang membership and delinquent activity is one that has been well documented. As early as 1927, Thrasher (1927/1963) concluded that gang members were more delinquent than their nongang counterparts and were commonly involved in offenses such as thefts, burglary, and robbery, as well as gang fights.

Since that time, researchers utilizing a variety of methodological techniques have all concluded that gang members are far more likely to be delinquent than nongang juveniles (Battin, Hill, Abott, Catalano,

& Hawkins, 1998; Bobrowski, 1988; Curry & Spergel, 1992; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Maxson & Klein, 1990; Thornberry & Burch, 1997; Thornberry et al., 1993; Tracy, 1987). Furthermore, researchers have noted that gang involvement in serious delinquent behavior has increased over time (Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 1997; Klein & Maxson, 1989; Miller, 1975). Although involvement in criminal activities is said to occupy only a small portion of the gang's daily existence, it is clear that it is seen as an important facet of gang membership (Chicago Crime Commission, 1995, p. 94; Monti, 1993, p. 238).

Similar findings emerged among researchers examining group delinquency versus gang-related delinquency. Although peer delinquency was found to be strongly correlated with individual delinquency, gang membership has been found to make a unique contribution to delinquency above and beyond the influence of peers and their delinquent behavior (Battin et al., 1998; Curry & Spergel, 1988; Miller, 1982; Morash, 1983).

On the other hand, Morash (1983) found that gang structure was only weakly related to an individual's delinquency, whereas peer delinquency was strongly related. In examining nonviolent crimes, Battin et al. (1998) found no differences between youths with delinquent friends and gang members.

Even more alarming is the association between gang membership and violent activities. Violence has long been associated with gangs. Thrasher (1927/ 1963) observed that gang violence was related to increased cohesion between the members and that violence and conflict served to integrate members into the gang and intensify group solidarity. Gangs have been found to employ violence as a "symbolic aspect of gang loyalty and identity" (Skolnick, Bluthenthal, & Correl, 1993, p. 196). On the other hand, it has been suggested that violence is just a by-product of the general increase in criminal offending (Klein & Maxson, 1989). In some cases, gang-related violence has been connected with controlling gang territory and turf (Skolnick et al., 1993, p. 196).

Regardless of the function it serves, there is little dispute that gangs are increasingly involved in violent behavior (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1988; Jackson & Rudman, 1993; Moore, 1993; National Drug Intelligence Center, 1995; Rogers, 1993; Spergel,

Kane, Hyatt, Ross, & Rodriguez, 1988). Several researchers have attributed this rise in violence to a corollary increase in both the availability and sophistication of the weaponry utilized by gangs.

As early as the 1970s, Walter Miller (1975) concluded that gangs had begun to use more sophisticated weapons and that the substantial increase in the availability and use of firearms was the "single most significant characteristic distinguishing the gangs of the 70s from their predecessors" (Covey et al., 1997; Miller, 1982, p. 115; Miller, 1992). Since that time, there has been widespread agreement that gang members are far more likely to be involved with firearms, that guns are easy to obtain and are used extensively by those in gangs (Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995; Covey et al., 1997; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1988; Huff, 1998; Klein & Maxson, 1989; Miller, 1992; Moore, 1991; National Drug Intelligence Center, 1995; Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 1997). In fact, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) found that gang members reported owning a mean number of 4.5 guns. Furthermore, the National Drug Intelligence Center (1995) reported that the semi-automatic pistol was the weapon preferred by many gang members.

Importantly, this increase in the use of firearms has translated into an increase in violent behavior and its associated consequences. Encounters between gangs have become more lethal (Block & Block, 1993; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974), and firearm death rates among youths are high, especially in urban areas (Lizotte, Tesoriero, Thornberry, & Krohn, 1994; O'Donnell, 1995; Wintemute, 1987). Likewise, there is some evidence that gang-related homicides have been increasing (Klein & Maxson, 1989; Miller, 1975).

Most traditional and modern theories of gang membership seek to explain the relationship between gang membership and delinquent behavior (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; A. Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958). Furthermore, it is clear from the empirical research that gang membership is related to a variety of delinquent activities including street crimes and firearms. However, as reviewed above, the operationalization of gang membership varies significantly across researchers and very typically consists of simply asking respondents to identify themselves as gang members. The purpose of this article is to examine the construct validity of a variety of self-report measures of gang membership by relating them to the concept of delinquent involvement.

Although the benefits of allowing respondents to identify themselves as gang members have been touted by numerous researchers (such as potentially avoiding the tautology of requiring delinquent behavior as a definitional criterion), it is unclear whether we are truly tapping into the types of gangs that match the conceptual definitions outlined above. To address this question, the analysis first examines the relationship between various self-report operationalizations of gang membership and the organizational characteristics of the respondents' gangs. Second, the various measures of gang membership are related to the delinquent behavior both of the gangs and of the individual respondents. Last, measures are related to both the gangs' and the respondents' involvement with firearms.

METHOD

DATA

The data for this study are derived from a 1995 study by Joseph F. Sheley, James D. Wright, and M. Dwayne Smith titled "Firearms, Violence and Youth in California, Illinois, Louisiana, and New Jersey, 1991." The researchers employed a self-administered survey that questioned students on their gun ownership, gang membership and gang activities, criminal activities, and drug and alcohol use, as well as a number of related issues. For a full description of the study, see Sheley and Wright (1995). The original study examined a sample of 1,663 men and women from 10 inner-city high schools in the above states. The sites for data collection were targeted because of their extensive involvement in gun-related activities. The high school students were sampled from large public schools in the major cities. Although technically not a random sample, the researchers found no obvious deviations from most sites (Sheley, Wright, & Smith, 1995, p. 1).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Table 2 shows that the sample is almost evenly split between the genders, with only slightly more males. The majority of the sample is

TABLE 2
Description of the Sample (N = 1,663)

	<i>Percentage</i>	
Gender		
Male	52.4	
Female	47.6	
Race		
White	1.8	
Black	75.0	
Hispanic	16.0	
Other	7.2	
Grade level		
9	25.2	
10	32.5	
11	21.4	
12	20.9	
Average age		16 years

African American. The next largest group of students is Hispanic. Whites account for less than 2% of the sample. The average student is 16 years old and is in the 10th grade.

MEASUREMENT OF THE VARIABLES

Gang membership. The independent variable in this analysis is the respondent's self-identification as a gang member. Respondents in this study were asked two separate questions to determine their gang involvement. The first question simply asked the students whether or not they were a member of a gang. The second item inquired as to the type of gang with the following attributes: just a bunch of people, an organized gang, and I don't belong to a gang. These two items were combined to create the following classifications: students who were not in a gang, students who did not identify themselves as a gang member but hung around with a bunch of guys, self-identified gang members who stated that it was just a bunch of guys, and students who identified themselves as members of an organized gang. In addition, respondents were asked a series of questions concerning the characteristics of their gang/group including its size, whether it had a name, a

leader, regular meetings, special clothing, a territory or “turf” that it defended, and a stash of guns for use by members.

Delinquent activities. Both individual and gang involvement in delinquent activities were measured. Respondents were asked if their gang/group engaged in the following activities: robbing stores or people, breaking into houses, stealing cars, fighting rival gangs, and beating up people. To measure individual delinquency, students were also asked if they had ever stolen anything worth more than \$50 and if they had ever been arrested.

Firearms involvement. Again, the survey measured both gang and individual involvement with firearms. Gang involvement was measured by whether most members of the gang/group carried guns, sold guns, stole guns, or participated in drive-by shootings; whether you had to have a gun to be in the gang/group or had to show you could use a gun to be in the gang/group; and whether lots of guns were around whenever the gang/group got together. Respondents also indicated whether they owned a firearm or if they had personally fired a gun.

RESULTS

SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND GANG CHARACTERISTICS

The purpose of this analysis was to determine the relationship between self-identification as a member of a group of peers or a gang and the characteristics most commonly utilized to define gangs. This analysis was restricted to individuals who identified themselves as a member of either a group of guys or a gang.

The results shown in Table 3 clearly demonstrate that there are significant organizational differences in the structure of these groups. First, those who considered themselves to be members of an organized gang were far more likely to be a part of a large group of individuals. Sixty-five percent of those students who said they belonged to a gang with more than 50 other members, whereas roughly 16% of those who said they hung around with a bunch of guys, regardless of whether or not they considered it a gang, had that many members.

TABLE 3
The Relationship Between Self-Definition of Gang Membership and Characteristics of the Gang (in percentages)

	<i>Not in a Gang, Just a Bunch of Guys (n = 38)</i>	<i>In a Gang, Just a Bunch of Guys (n = 186)</i>	<i>In an Organized Gang (n = 104)</i>
Gang Size*			
2-5 people	7.9	18.3	3.8
6-10	23.7	24.7	3.8
11-20	31.6	20.4	8.7
21-50	21.1	20.4	18.3
51+	15.8	16.1	65.4
Gang has name*	45.9	54.5	93.8
Gang has leader*	8.3	18.4	64.9
Regular meetings*	21.6	29.5	74.3
Special clothing*	16.2	17.5	40.0
Territory/turf*	19.4	23.9	78.2
Gun stash*	5.6	20.4	69.2

* $p < .05$.

Similarly, members of organized gangs were almost twice as likely to have a name associated with their group. Individuals who said they were in a gang but that it was just a bunch of guys were only slightly more likely to have a gang name than those who did not identify themselves as gang members (54.5% vs. 45.9%).

Furthermore, organized gangs were more than 3 times as likely to have a leader and significantly more likely inclined to hold regular meetings. Interestingly, whereas more organized gang members had special clothing associated with their gang, less than 50% of the members of all groups indicated that this was a characteristic of their group. The majority of the organized gang members had a particular territory or turf associated with their gang and almost 70% stated that their gang had a stash of guns.

Overall, few differences were found between those who indicated that they hung around with a bunch of guys, regardless of whether or not they identified themselves as a gang member. In almost all cases, less than a quarter of the respondents indicated that their group possessed these characteristics. The notable exception to this was the group name—close to half of the respondents claimed to have a name.

On the other hand, a clear majority of those who indicated they were a part of an organized gang acknowledged these attributes. This implies that there are significant differences in the types of gangs being examined by researchers, and respondents belonging to very different types of groups are answering this question similarly. If the original question concerning gang members were the only indicator of gang membership utilized, researchers would risk diluting the extent to which the gangs possess these characteristics.

GANG MEMBERSHIP/GANG CHARACTERISTICS AND DELINQUENT ACTIVITIES

The next step in this research was to examine the extent to which self-identification and the characteristics of these gangs influence involvement in delinquent activities including drug use. Table 4 shows the results of this analysis and reports both the percentage of students from each group/gang involved in the delinquent activities and the risk estimates for that group. The risk estimates, or log odds, tell how much more likely the indicator group versus the comparison group was to engage in that activity.¹ The risk estimates can only be calculated for dichotomous variables or on 2×2 tables. Therefore, for purposes of calculating these estimates, new dichotomous variables were created to classify each of the different types of self-identified gang members. The comparison group for those who stated they belonged to an organized gang was all other respondents. The comparison group for those who identified themselves as gang members but claimed they hung around with a bunch of guys was those who were not in a gang or who hung around with a group but did not identify themselves as gang members. The comparison group for those who did not identify themselves as gang members but who hung around with a bunch of guys was those who were not in the gang. Last, the comparison group for those who were not in a gang or group was all of the other respondents.

In all cases, those individuals who claimed to be part of an organized gang were overwhelmingly more likely to report that their gang engaged in delinquent activities. This is in contrast to those who stated that they were simply a part of a group of guys. These groups were the least likely to engage in delinquent behavior, regardless of whether or not the respondent identified himself or herself as a gang member.

TABLE 4
Self-Identification With Gang and Individual Delinquency
(in percentages)

	<i>Not in a Gang or Group</i> (n = 972)	<i>Not in a Gang, Just a Bunch of Guys</i> (n = 35)	<i>In a Gang, Just a Bunch of Guys</i> (n = 202)	<i>In an Organized Gang</i> (n = 111)
Group delinquency				
Rob people/stores**	(0.49)	11.8 (0.53)	12.9 (1.01)	41.8 (4.87)**
Break into houses**	(0.30)*	8.6 (0.86)	10.0 (1.36)	41.1 (6.61)**
Steal cars	(0.57)	25.7 (1.39)	21.3 (0.81)	64.3 (6.42)**
Assault**	(0.37)**	25.0 (0.50)	42.4 (2.01)	62.5 (2.53)**
Fighting gangs**	(0.55)	33.3 (0.33)	34.0 (0.89)	81.8 (8.57)**
Individual delinquency				
Stole something > \$50**	11.8 (0.28)**	18.0 (1.07)	21.7 (2.60)**	44.5 (5.35)**
Arrested**	24.6 (4.27)**	26.0 (1.70)	46.0 (1.59)**	67.3 (4.65)**

NOTE: Risk estimates are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Organized gangs were almost 5 times more likely to have committed a robbery and over 6 times more likely to have participated in a break-in or to have stolen a car. Interestingly, there was only a slight difference between organized gangs and peer groups where the individuals considered themselves to be gang members in terms of their probability of committing an assault. The most dramatic difference was found in terms of the gang/groups' participation in gang fights. Organized gangs were 8.5 times more likely than other groups to have fought with a rival gang. Almost 82% of those reporting membership in an organized gang recounted that their gang had been in a gang fight. In comparison, only a third of those who stated they hung around with a bunch of guys, again regardless of their self-identification as a gang member, reported engaging in this activity.

A similar pattern was found with regard to the individual member's delinquent behavior. Members of organized gangs were 5 times more likely to have stolen something worth more than \$50 and almost 5 times more likely to have been arrested. Fully two thirds of those in organized gangs reported that they had been arrested. However, in examining individual delinquency a slightly different picture emerged when comparing organized gang members to the other groups. There was more of a similarity between those who identified themselves as

gang members and those who did not, especially in terms of their probability of having been arrested. Roughly one quarter of both those who were not in a group and those in a group but who did not consider themselves gang members had been arrested, whereas 46% of those who claimed to be in a gang with a bunch of guys had been arrested. Again, fully two thirds of those in organized gangs had been arrested.

The clear picture that emerges is that self-reported membership in an organized gang is related to both group delinquency and individual delinquency. Furthermore, membership in this type of a gang makes a unique contribution to explaining delinquent behavior above and beyond that of simply being in a group of peers. This includes individuals in peer groups who identify themselves as gang members.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND FIREARMS INVOLVEMENT

The last objective of this research was to examine respondents' self-identification as a gang member in relation to their involvement with firearms. Table 5 demonstrates the relationship between gang/group membership and both gang and individual firearm involvement. Very few individuals who were members of a peer group reported that their group was involved with firearms. Eight percent reported that most or all of the people they hung out with owned guns or that guns were plentiful when the group got together. This is logical, as only 5.6% of these individuals reported that their gang had a stash of guns available for members (Table 3). This group was slightly more inclined to be involved in stealing or selling guns (14.3%). Almost no one reported that the group required members to have a gun or to be able to use a gun to join.

In contrast, those who belonged to a peer group and reported that they were a member of a gang were more apt to report that most members owned a gun or that guns were plentiful when the group got together. However, this was still reported by less than a fourth of these respondents. Similar to those above, most of these individuals did not report that guns were necessary to join the gang.

The most distinct relationships again exist among those who reported being a part of an organized gang. They were over 8 times more likely to state that most of the members owned guns and that the gang had an ample supply of guns. Furthermore, over half of these respon-

TABLE 5
Self-Identification With Firearm Involvement (in percentages)

	<i>Not in a Gang or Group (n = 972)</i>	<i>Not in a Gang, Just a Bunch of Guys (n = 35)</i>	<i>In a Gang, Just a Bunch of Guys (n = 199)</i>	<i>In an Organized Gang (n = 109)</i>
Group/gang involvement				
Most/all own guns*		8.1 (0.92)	22.0 (2.02)**	70.6 (8.52)**
Guns plentiful when together**		8.6 (0.23)	16.6 (1.47)	60.6 (8.20)**
Carry guns regularly**		5.7 (1.67)*	11.3 (1.31)	51.8 (8.81)**
Shoot guns regularly**		2.9 (0.88)	14.7 (1.59)	52.7 (8.67)**
Drive-by shootings regularly**		0 (0.86)	7.4 (2.41)	22.3 (9.41)**
Steal guns**		14.3 (0.25)	11.8 (0.63)	50.0 (6.84)**
Sell guns**		14.3 (0.25)	21.8 (1.31)	68.5 (8.13)**
Have to have gun to join		2.9 (0.07)*	3.4 (0.46)	7.5 (1.92)
Have to show could use gun**		0 (0.10)**	6.5 (0.89)	19.6 (3.46)**
Individual involvement				
Fired gun**	29.8 (0.42)**	42.0 (1.70)	40.9 (1.59)**	68.5 (4.65)**
Stole gun**	.3 (0.06)**	0 (0.95)	3.0 (9.19)**	8.3 (12.64)**
Own a hunting rifle**	3.1 (0.36)**	10.2 (3.52)**	6.4 (1.93)*	13.0 (3.75)**
Own military rifle**	1.6 (0.15)**	2.0 (1.24)	7.4 (4.69)**	13.9 (6.33)**
Own shotgun**	3.6 (0.23)**	10.4 (3.15)*	8.8 (2.43)**	25.2 (7.06)**
Own sawed-off shotgun**	3.1 (0.27)**	6.1 (2.02)	6.9 (2.20)**	18.3 (5.70)**
Own revolver**	7.1 (0.29)**	10.2 (1.48)	15.8 (2.40)**	29.6 (4.53)**
Own auto/semiauto handgun**	6.3 (0.22)**	8.2 (1.33)	14.2 (2.45)**	39.1 (7.95)**

NOTE: Risk estimates are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

dents stated that they shot their guns regularly. They were 9.5 times more likely to be involved in a drive-by shooting and to have either stolen or sold guns. Only 7.5% of the students stated that one needed a gun to join the gang, whereas almost 20% said that one needed to show that one could use a gun to join the gang. This implies that gun ownership and use is a part of the gang subculture although it may not necessarily be something that is required prior to one's joining the gang. Overall, firearms appear to be prevalent in organized gangs. They are present when the gang meets, and its members frequently carry and shoot their weapons.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to investigate the operationalization of gang membership and its influence on delinquent activities including drug and firearm use. The results demonstrate that there are important consequences to the method utilized to measure gang membership. This has an impact on both the types of gangs studied by the researcher and the negative consequences of the respondent's gang involvement.

This research reveals that there are significant organizational differences in the structure of the gang depending on how respondents classify themselves. In all cases, those reporting memberships in organized gangs were far more likely to report that their gangs possess the characteristics typically associated with traditional street gangs. Their groups were larger, more likely to have names, leaders, regular meetings, a stash of guns, and association with a particular territory. Few differences emerged among the different peer groups regardless of whether or not the respondent identified himself or herself as a member of a gang.

More important, the respondent's self-identification had a strong impact on both the group's and the individual's criminal behavior. Overwhelmingly, students who considered themselves members of an organized gang were exceedingly more apt to engage in all types of delinquent activities. Last, organized gangs were found to be much more involved with firearms and firearm-related activities.

One of the most important findings to emerge from this analysis is the similarity between those who claimed that they hung out with a peer group and were not a part of a gang and those who claimed gang membership but stated that they were just a bunch of guys. Interestingly, these two groups were fairly similar both in terms of their organizational structure and their delinquent involvement. Whereas in most cases, juveniles claiming gang membership were slightly more likely to be involved in delinquent activities, these individuals were distinctly different from those juveniles who identified themselves as part of an organized gang.

This finding has significant implications for future research and clearly demonstrates the importance of carefully operationalizing the term *gang member*. If researchers rely solely on self-identification without employing follow-up questions or examining additional criteria, they risk weakening the strength of their findings and possibly even failing to find relationships. Specifically, including these individuals in the analysis will likely dilute the strength of the relationship between gang involvement and delinquent behavior.

Furthermore, it is evident that respondents identifying themselves as gang members belong to very different types of groups. Logically, this would also be important from a theoretical standpoint. Different etiological factors may explain the existence of these groups and influence one's decision to join. It may confound the analysis to include all respondents who identify themselves as gang members. Likewise, if this is the case, then the effectiveness of prevention measures will also differ between these groups. Moreover, policy makers would clearly want to respond very differently to organized gangs considering their delinquent involvement.

Regardless of the purpose of one's research, it is evident that this is a topic that deserves considerable attention. Considering the potential consequences, researchers should, to the extent possible, continue to refine both the conceptualization and the operationalization of this term.

NOTE

1. The odds ratio is calculated by dividing the probability of the event's occurring by the probability of the event's not occurring. For example, the odds that an organized gang would be involved in a robbery is 4.87. This tells us that organized gangs are almost 5 times more likely than other types of gangs to have been involved in this event. There were 46 members of organized gangs who said that their gang had committed robberies compared to 64 members of organized gangs who said that they did not. This yields an odds of .7188 for organized gang members to engage in this activity. There were 31 non-organized gang members who stated that they engaged in this activity, compared to 210 of the non-organized gang members who did not. The odds of a non-organized gang member's engaging in this activity is .1476. Therefore, the odds ratio of organized to non-organized gang members is $.7188/.1476$ or 4.87. Odds ratios of 1 indicate equal risk for the two groups being compared. Risk estimates above 1 indicate a positive relationship between the variables, whereas risk estimates below 1 signify a negative relationship between the variables.

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